インテリビレッジの座敷童（ざしきわらし）

鎌池和馬

イラスト／真早

電撃文庫

インテリビレッジの座敷童

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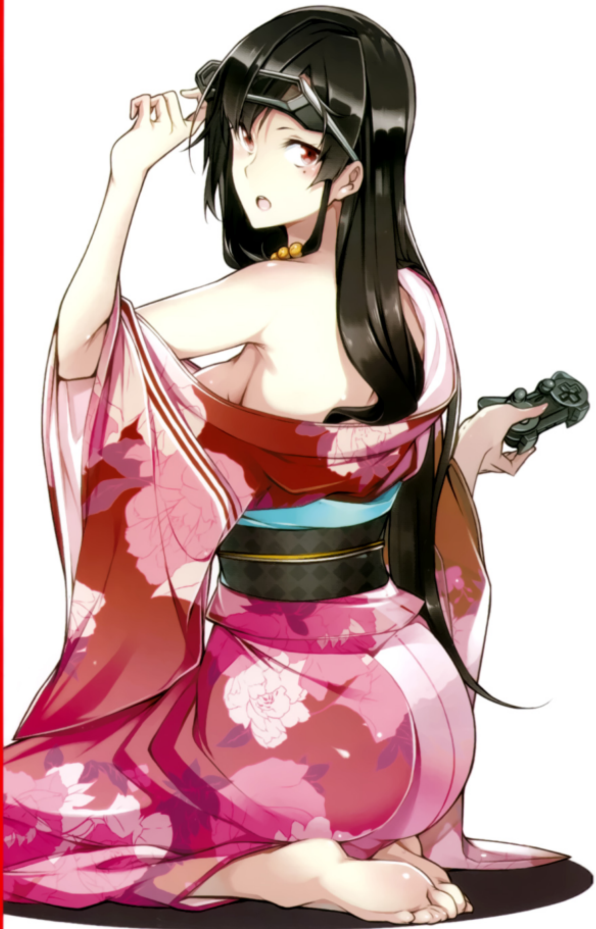
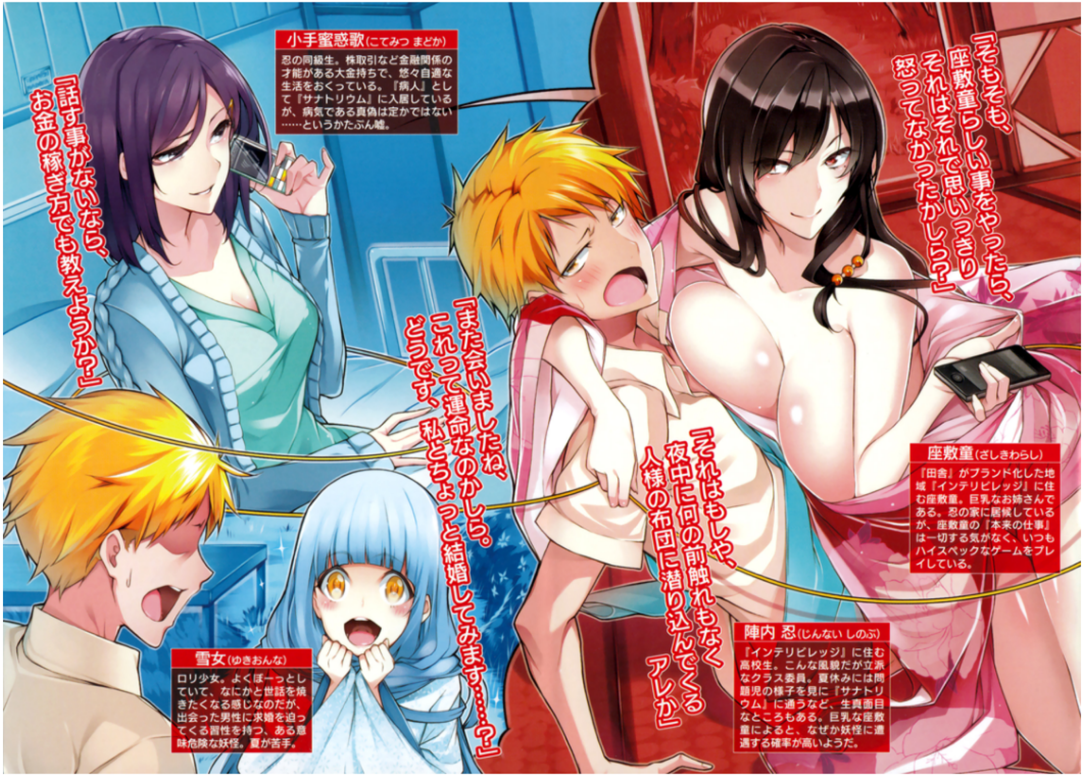



「そもそも、座敷童らしい事をやったら、それはそれで思いっきり怒ってなかったかしら？」
「それはもしや、夜中に何の前触れもなく人様の布団に潜り込んでくるアレか」
「また会いましたね、これって運命なのかしら。どうです、私とちょっと結婚してみます……？」
「話す事がないなら、お金の稼ぎ方でも教えようか？」

座敷童（ざしきわらし）

『田舎』がブランド化した地域『インテリビレッジ』に住む座敷童。巨乳なお姉さんである。忍の家に居候しているが、座敷童の『本来の仕事』は一切する気がなく、いつもハイスペックなゲームをプレイしている。

陣内 忍（じんない しのぶ）

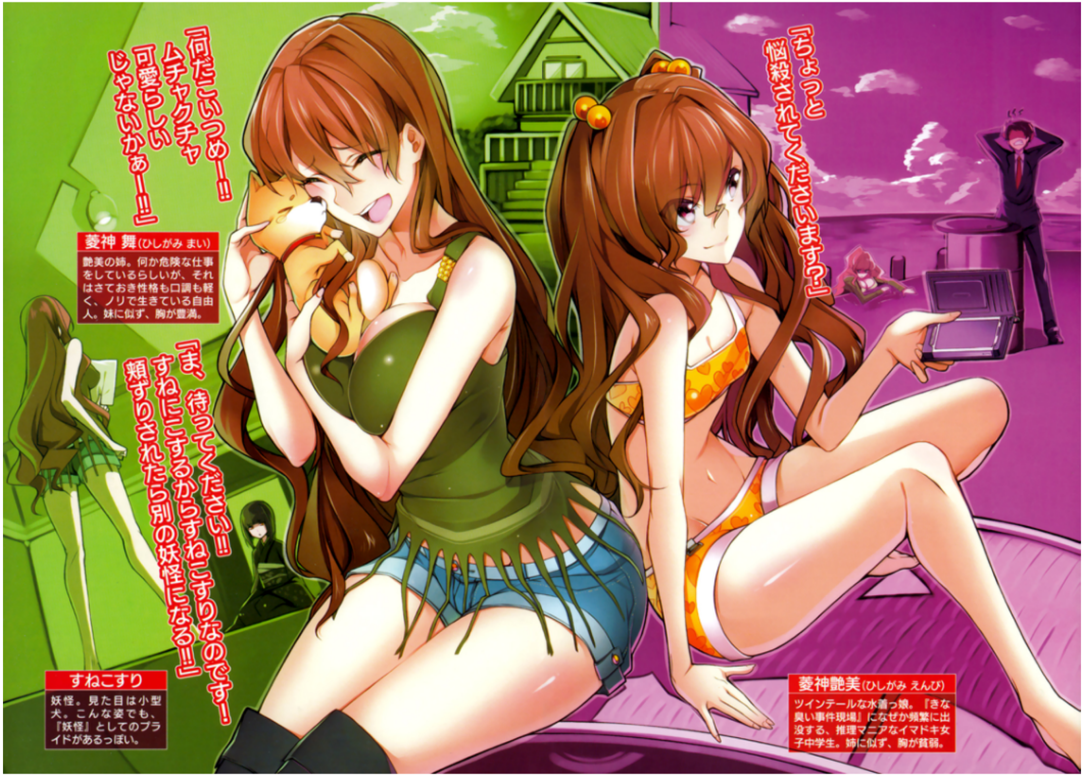
『インテリビレッジ』に住む高校生。こんな風貌だが立派なクラス委員。夏休みには問題児の様子を見に『サナトリウム』に通うなど、生真面目なところもある。巨乳な座敷童によると、なぜか妖怪に遭遇する確率が高いようだ。

小手蜜惑歌（こてみつ まどか）

忍の同級生。株取引など金融関係の才能がある大金持ちで、悠々自適な生活をおくっている。『病人』として『サナトリウム』に入居しているが、病気である真偽は定かではない……というかたぶん嘘。

雪女（ゆきおんな）

ロリ少女。よくぼーっとしていて、なにかと世話を焼きたくなる感じなのだが、出会った男性に求婚を迫ってくる習性を持つ、ある意味危険な妖怪。夏が苦手。


「ちょっと
悩殺されてくださいます?」
菱神艶美(ひしがみ えんび)
ツインテールな水着っ娘。『きな臭い事件現場』になぜか頻繁に出没する、推理マニアなイマドキ女子中学生。姉に似ず、胸が貧弱。
「何だこいつめー!!
ムチャクチャ
可愛らしい
じゃないかぁー!!」
菱神 舞(ひしがみ まい)
艶美の姉。何か危険な仕事をしているらしいが、それはさておき性格も口調も軽く、ノリで生きている自由人。妹に似ず、胸が豊満。
「ま、待ってください!!
すねこするからすねこすりなのです!
頬ずりされたら別の妖怪になる!!」
すねこすり
妖怪。見た目は小型犬。こんな姿でも、『妖怪』としてのプライドがあるっぽい。

内幕 隼（うちまく はやぶさ）

刑事。殺人事件などの凶悪犯罪を扱う『一課』所属の刑事。どこにいくにもスーツを着るような、型にハマり気味な常識人。

祝（はふり）

とある組織のリーダー。杓子定規な受け答えをする規律正しい性格。不意を突かれると結構弱い。

「何でわざわざ強引に有給取らせて俺をここまで連れてきた？」
「来たね来たね。インテリビレッジ風化村」
「そろそろ電車が来るんじゃねえか。これ逃すと次は夜になっちまうぞ」
「そうだね。悩んだって仕方がないか」
「実は近くにカジノがあるとかボーナスステージってないかな？」
『良いでしょう。内容を仰ってください』

もくじ

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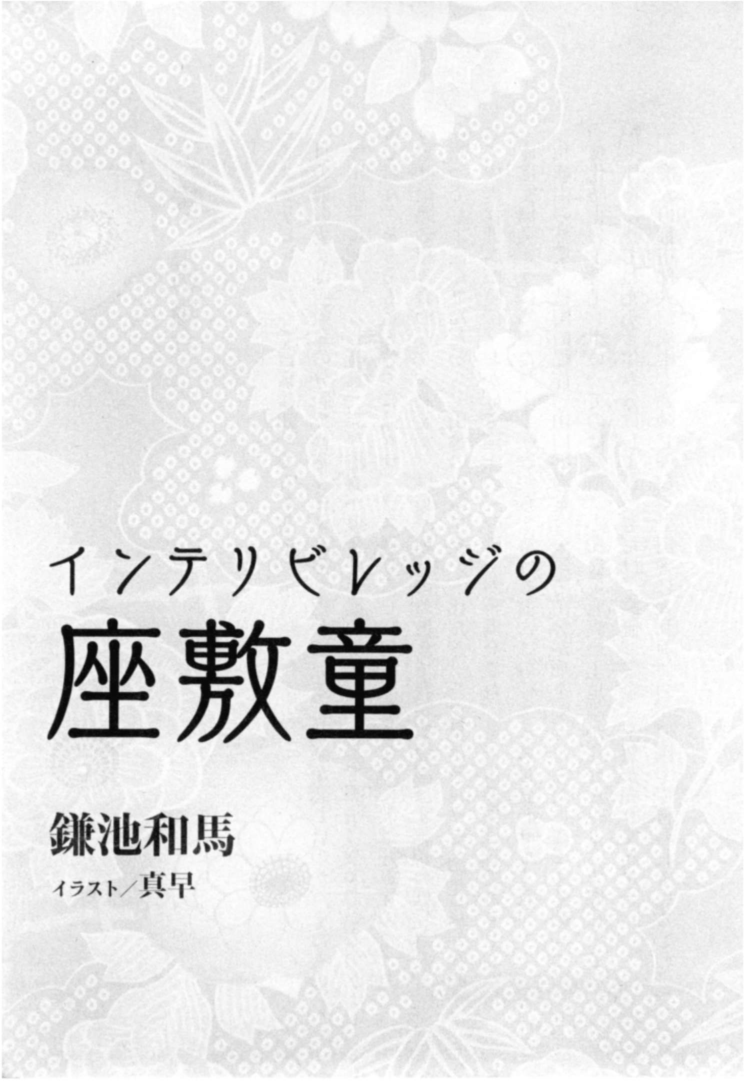
デザイン／渡邊宏一（有限会社 ニイナナニイゴオ）



インテリビレッジの座敷童

鎌池和馬

イラスト／真早

Regarding a Detour

“Are you familiar with the term Intellectual Village?”

The girl before me was getting cocky for a Zashiki Warashi. She must have missed having music because she was using my smartphone without asking again. She may have been getting carried away due to being the kind of black-haired beauty that looked perfect in a red yukata. She was certainly too glamorous to be called a “child”[1] and liked going on walks despite being a Zashiki Warashi. In a way, that was the worst possible combination. Was that Youkai trying to bring my house to ruin whenever she walked to the sweets shop?

“Of course I am. I live in one. It’s a high class branding of the concept of ‘rural’. They’re proposed by three star hotels or famous department stores and publicized by advertising companies. Thanks to that, a third of the country was redeveloped and had its primary industry completely changed,” I replied in annoyance.

Please, just let me eat my popsicle before it melts.

“Wakayama’s wood industry, Akita’s rice farming, and Yamaguchi’s fishing industry. All the rural areas of the country were changed. This is one of those places. The official reason given is to curb rural depopulation by having people move from the cities to the country. But who’s gonna live in this expensive land? In reality, they know they can’t beat the cheap imported goods, so they’re trying to isolate us. They’re selling things based on high prices, safety, and high quality.”

“I heard that those cities with a concentrated population of a hundred million aren’t due to rural depopulation, but due to people not being able to live in rural areas. With the ecological and health booms, a house here in Noukotsu Village is more of a trophy than an overseas villa.”

“The beef and fruit are especially amazing. One bunch of grapes is 30,000 yen. Of course, thieves’ eyes will light up at that thought. That’s why the security network here is top class despite everything looking like you’re out in the country. An ion defense device has been constructed to prevent the brand-name genetics of the pollen blowing in from being raped. Just a honeybee net wouldn’t have been enough."

"Earth, wind, water, grass, bugs, and fish. Everything around here has a price tag, doesn't it? A liter of the water in the rivers here costs 300 yen. The lightweight trucks driving around are electric. The paths through the fields have lines of solar panels that change direction like sunflowers. AI machinery is used in production control for agriculture and fishing. Those who like to shop can do so via an optical communications network or the internet. The area is just a fusion of rural scenery and cutting edge technology."

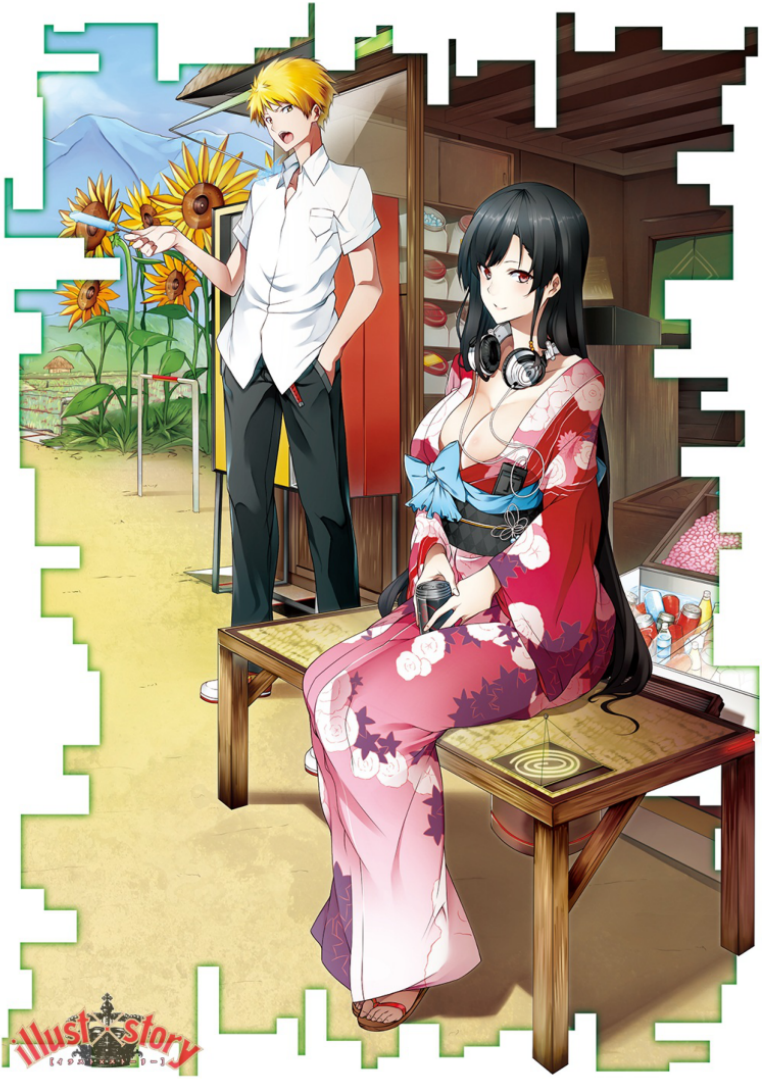
"The problem is this means the city doesn't have a single convenience store. The deserted train station, the outdated sweets shop, and even this popsicle that seems like solidified shaved ice are all rare brand name items."

"Not to mention things like me."

"Don't look so pleased with yourself after someone gives you a soda when you're about to collapse from heatstroke."

I was a bit worried that at some point a group of Zashiki Warashi would gather at a small school pool or somewhere and make a class change to Shichinin Misaki or some other kind of Youkai. With how irresponsible they could be, it wouldn't surprise me.

"While Yamanba and Hitotsume Kozou may be, Zashiki Warashi are not an endangered species. In fact, thanks to the favorable treatment you get, like doves in rural parks, there are actually an excessive number of you around the country. I'm betting someone moving into a new apartment finds one of you in there about as frequently as they find the previous resident's microwave."



“Oh, you just don’t understand value. I’ve heard talk of the domestic occult eventually being exported at a high price.”

“Why would anyone want a Youkai that does nothing besides steal your futon at night?”

“Heh. Just so you know, the Zashiki Warashi were voted #1 in Monthly Lovely Youkai’s Top 100 Popularity Poll.”

“That pinup magazine!? D-did they even get 100 different types for the entries?”

“The possibilities of e-books are endless.”

“You bought that with my smartphone again, didn’t you!? I can’t believe bitches like you got 1st!”

“…Ho hohhh. You’ll find us all over the place. These rural areas around the country known as Intellectual Villages also function as water supply points for the domestic occult travelling between areas.”

“?”

“For example, there is that mysterious old man dressed like a baby who has been clinging to your back for a while. …Is this an example of that extremely major type of Youkai?”

Notes

1. ↑ The Warashi of Zashiki Warashi means “child”

Chapter 1: Regarding Jinnai Shinobu

Part 1

The large residence with a thatched roof looked more like the set for a period piece than somewhere anyone actually lived. As I opened the front door, my eyes met with a burglar young enough to still get away with being a freeter.

“Eh? Wait…you!?”

As my heart jumped up into my throat, I reached for the umbrella stand and grabbed a wooden sword that had been bought as a souvenir in Kyoto.

“What the hell happened to our home security!?”

I shouted out louder than necessary more to gain control of my panicking heart than anything. When I swung up the sword with relative seriousness, the burglar managed to unfreeze his body and move. His body readied to flee. With loud footsteps, he shot out onto the open porch and then into the unnecessarily large yard.

The burglar tripped over a stone in the yard and fell flat on his face. Wallets and an ornamental bear spilled out of the backpack he wore. He hesitated over whether he should pick them up, but he finally decided to give priority to flight.

My overall small granny must have finally noticed the ruckus because she headed out to the porch. She smelled of incense, so she must have been cleaning the Buddhist altar.

“What is it, Shinobu? Did a stray cat get in?”

“It was a burglar. Honestly, what happened to our house’s sensors?”

“Sorry. Your granny likes a nice breeze, so I had a window open. That shut off the switch.”

“No, I’m not blaming you. And when I say ‘sensors’, I’m not really talking about the security company either.”

“All the agricultural products in these Intellectual Villages are brand names, so we get so many thieves. I was left speechless when I heard a bunch of grapes costs 30,000 yen.”

“Yeah, but the junmai daiginjo dad and the others make in the facility out back is at least 50,000 yen a cup, right?”

The burglar had spilled his spoils across the yard, but granny checked inside to make sure nothing else was taken. Burglars had started to steal even the solar panels on the roof, so it could be a real pain.

Meanwhile, I put the Kyoto souvenir back in the umbrella stand and decided I might as well report it to the police with my smartphone. It likely wasn’t going to do any good. The village’s police stations were incredibly short on officers and they rarely answered the call from the 110 operator due to either listening to music with headphones during the day or sleeping at their posts at night. Also, they could hardly stand up to a real armed group of thieves. If people actually believed the police could do anything, they wouldn’t exactly pay the security companies so much out of their own pockets, now would they?

When I finished with that process that I had decided I “might as well” do, I walked across the wooden floor of the hallway and further back into the residence.

The thatched roof house had no redeeming value outside of its age, but it did have a few points in its favor.

One of those was the real Zashiki Warashi that lived inside.

“Honestly, isn’t it a Zashiki Warashi’s job to protect the house and keep this kind of thing from happening?” I muttered as I arrived at a door.

Without knocking on the sliding door (can you even knock on sliding doors?), I forcefully opened it and shouted at the top of my voice.

“You, Zashiki Warashi!! Quit slacking off and do your job!!”

But the Zashiki Warashi in question was not there.

After staring into the empty room for a second, I headed for a new destination. I knew where she likely was if she was not there. It was possible she was out (even if she was a Zashiki Warashi), but that was highly unlikely in the middle of a summer day as hot as this one. She would only bother to go out for a walk early in the morning or in the evening.

It may have been the case for all Zashiki Warashis, but there was one characteristic that the one in our house definitely had. Due to this characteristic, I knew one place that had either the highest or second highest appearance rate for her.

That place was my room.

“…That damn indoor Youkai.”

This time there was no reason to knock or say anything. I grabbed the handle of the sliding door to my room and forcefully slid it to the side.

“You’re getting careless, Zashiki Warashi. How the hell did you overlook a burglar!?”

The Zashiki Warashi that had entered my room without permission glanced over at me. She was a black-haired beauty that looked perfect in a red yukata. The Youkai’s body proportions were much too glamorous to be called a “child”.

She was wearing special goggles for a 3D movie.

She was holding a wireless controller and controlling a character displayed on the big screen.

For an instant…

Just an instant…

My body froze up despite the fact that I knew this was what Youkai were really like. A single word took control of my mind. On an impulse, I opened my mouth and shouted.

“Appearances!! You need to keep up appearances as a Youkai!! The culture of Youkai is part of this country’s traditional arts! Do you want to lose that!?”

“Yeah, but isn’t that idea of Youkai just taken from manga and anime? Youkai are supposed to blend into the background of each passing era. The idea of the ‘good old’ Youkai that fit into the ‘good old days’ is nothing more than a recent trend. There’s no real reason for us to stay exactly the same.”

“Yes, but a Zashiki Warashi is supposed to bring fortune to the house it lives in as well as drive out burglars and such.”

"I don't wanna do that!!"

The glamorous Zashiki Warashi removed the goggles, took a pause in the video game, and then turned to face me while still sitting cross-legged.

The hem of her yukata was flipped up and the white of her thighs stabbed into my eyes, but she did not seem to mind.

"I would rather you didn't shove all the battling onto us Zashiki Warashi! I am completely confident I would lose spectacularly to another Youkai and even to a human if they were Onmyouji class!!"

"This is the 21st century, so I doubt that profession even exists anymore. Also, if this was some Onmyou master thief or something else straight from a light novel, I think he would steal things in a more fantastical way, you damn Youkai."

"Also, if I did more Zashiki Warashi-like things, wouldn't you actually get mad at me?"

"You mean sneak into my futon and straddle me with no warning in the middle of the night?"

That was apparently a characteristic of all Zashiki Warashis, and it would have been fine if she looked like the stereotypical Zashiki Warashi. However, when it was done by one whose bust exceeded 90 cm, it was more than an adolescent boy knew how to deal with. Rather than feel lucky, I would feel a shock rush through my body like my heart was jumping up and breaking my ribs.

The dynamite body Zashiki Warashi was completely unaware of all this, so she casually changed the subject.

"More importantly, you went to the Sanatorium, didn't you? The sweets shop is on the way. I assume you at least bought some popsicles on your way back. Can I count on at least that much?"

"Shut up. Huh? They're gone… Oh, when I grabbed the wooden sword, I…"

I headed back to the front entrance, but not to treat the Zashiki Warashi. I simply did not want the popsicles I had bought to melt before anyone could eat them. The box of 10 popsicles was indeed lying on the floor. I had dropped them when I reached for the wooden sword to deal with the burglar.

I returned to the room with the Zashiki Warashi and she immediately pulled a soda-flavored popsicle from the box. I received no thanks whatsoever. However…

“Nnnn!! Air conditioning isn’t bad, but you just can’t beat cooling down from within.”

“Your smiles at times like this really do fit the ‘child’ part.”

She ignored my comment. As a Youkai who was as old as the house, she may have seen it as the nonsense of a human child.

“Speaking of the Sanatorium, did Madoka say anything troublesome?”

“…She’s more or less troublesome through and through, but she was extra troublesome today.”

“If it’s that bad, I think I’ll plug my ears right now.”

“No, you’re listening to this. I’m getting you involved in this even if I have to force you.”

Part 2

The reason I had gone out into the heat during summer break was to head to a facility known as the Sanatorium so I could visit an acquaintance named Madoka.

However, Madoka did not have some horrible illness.

She was simply a classmate of mine.

As the old-fashioned word “sanatorium” suggests, it was simply meant to add to the atmosphere of the Intellectual Village just like the thatched roof of my house. The facility had nothing to do with tuberculosis, mental illness, or anything else medical. The Intellectual Village created a brand-name image of the “good old days”, and the Sanatorium was something like an attraction.

I had no idea why the rich would pay so much money just to be hospitalized there despite having nothing wrong with them. But then, taking a trial tour of the JSDF had become a popular means of dieting, so businesses had been created around providing strange ways of staying healthy.

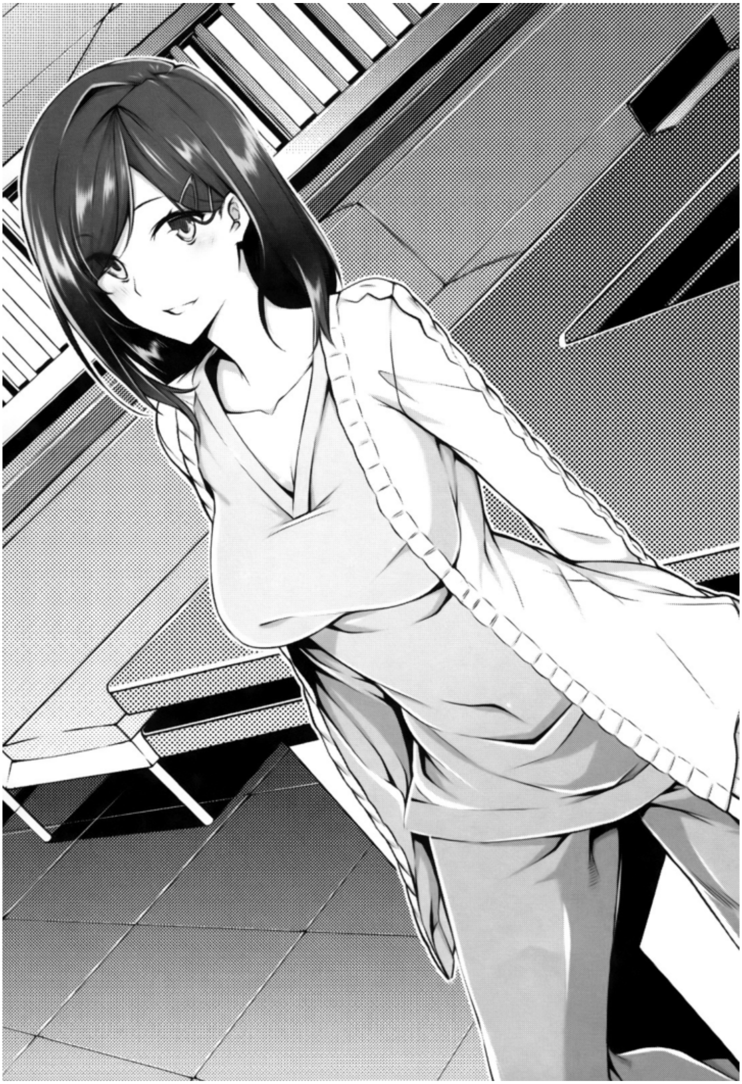
Since it was targeted towards rich people with odd tastes, the price was of course ridiculously high.

My classmate Madoka-chan had a rich enough family, but she herself was a super high school girl who did day trading herself.

They must have been focusing on providing the expected image, because the waiting room had overly strict means of preventing escape installed in place.

“Hello, how are things outside?” Asked a girl in a thin surgical gown with a smile so lively I doubted anyone could be healthier than her.

“Peaceful…other than the off-season Yuki Onna I met at the bus stop. Y’know, I’m not going to have interesting things happen to me all the time.”



“But it’s summer break for students.”

“A perfectly healthy girl who chooses to hole up in this medical facility has no right to say that.”

“That doesn’t stop me from saying it,” said Madoka.

I was there simply because I was the class president. To be blunt, Madoka was a problem child. She did not get along well with her parents and she found no enjoyment in school. No actual abuse or bullying had occurred, but she was still definitely isolating herself.

Our homeroom teacher preferred to avoid all conflict, so the job of checking on her periodically had been thrust onto me even though it was summer break.

“Are you doing your homework?”

“That really has no impact from someone who hasn’t done his homework either.”

“I won’t deny that, but I’m just trying to start a conversation. If I don’t find something to talk about, the conversation isn’t going to last long. I’ve been looking after you since April and I still don’t even know what kind of food you like.”

“If we have nothing to talk about, I can teach you how to make money.”

“That’s the thing about you. You can make all the money you need on your own, so you never rely on anyone. And so you feel no need to meet anyone halfway. Is that why you’ve isolated yourself despite having no real reason to?”

“You say that, but what do you want me to do? Should I throw 30 billion yen into the train station trash just to get along with everyone? Or should I force troublesome tasks on others for the sake of communication even though I don’t need anything done? You know, something like ‘Hey, you over there. I’ll give you 5 billion yen, so use it to make double that.’ Actually, I think that would be enough to put a normal high school student in the mental hospital.”

“Yeah, probably,” I replied offhand.

Unfortunately, my role was merely to talk with Madoka, not to resolve her problems. Why would I go that far? It isn’t like class president is a paying job.

“By the way, some guys in suits have been walking around. Who are they? Did you hire some kind of service again?”

“They aren’t here for me. I haven’t lived that long yet.”

“?”

“They’re inheritance agents.” Madoka lightly waved her slender index finger around. “As you know, the Sanatorium focuses more on creating the right mood than on any actual function. The only people here are either health enthusiasts like me or old people who have gotten sick of making money in some filthy city so they simply want to live out their last days peacefully surrounded by the beauty of nature.”

“And what are those something-or-other agents here for?”

“I don’t really know. The reasons differ from person to person. Some do not want to give their family their inheritance. Some want to give their inheritance to their mistress rather than their wife. Some want to give everything to their grandchild while not leaving a single yen for their son.”

I can’t say what my expression was at that moment, but Madoka had a mischievous look in her eyes as she stared straight at me.

She had a way of livening up when it came to talk of money.

“All of them have their reasons for leaving their families and coming to the Sanatorium, so it isn’t surprising that these inheritance agents are so common here.”

“Being rich must be tough…” I muttered without thinking.

Merely by living in an Intellectual Village, I may have qualified as rich, but my allowance was no greater than that of a normal kid, so it never seemed that way to me.

“It could be a lot worse than that.” Madoka grinned. “A while ago, there was a rumor that anyone who entered a certain room here would die. A certain rich old man actually had his family enthusiastically try to throw him into that room.”

“…Seriously?”

“Seriously. I thought it might have something to do with Youkai and a Package, but it must not since nothing ever came of it. Or maybe the assembly simply hadn’t been completed.”

I didn’t like the sound of the terms she used.

Feeling weary, I replied, “If you’re going to talk about dangerous things, at least keep it within the realm of things relating to my position as the class president…”

“What are you talking about? If you haven’t brought me any interesting stories, my only option is to laugh at your tragedy. So I'll take this opportunity to tell you something."

"Myahhhh myahhh!! I'm not listening!!

"You mentioned that you met an off-season Yuki Onna on the way, didn't you? You're probably in a lot of trouble thanks to that. Why is it that Youkai always seem to hide when the reporters for a spiritual TV show arrive, but they always show themselves at the worst possible time for you?"

"Don't ask me!"

"Is there some kind of smell only Youkai can detect? Maybe it has something to do with the sake your family makes."

"My old man treats that Zashiki Warashi like she's some great king of fear he needs to tremble before while my uncle is known for only getting teased by her."

"But the fact remains that they both have a high encounter rate with her, right? Just like with that Yuki Onna, you always seem to run across the ones that you could have easily gone without running across and that it is quite dangerous to meet."

She seemed to be truly enjoying herself.

As if in contrast to my weariness, Madoka's face lit up as she added, "What I was talking about before barely counts as dangerous compared to you and that Yuki Onna. But now that you've run across her, you're likely already involved and nothing I say will change it."

Part 3

The red yukata-wearing Zashiki Warashi rolled over, opened a laptop lying on the tatami mats, and began browsing a video sharing site.

“I get it, I get it. Things took a dangerous turn and someone is trying to kill you. That has nothing to do with me. O-Ohhhhhh!! A panda videooooo!!”

“How cold-hearted can you be!?”

“I already told you not to expect any Youkai battles out of me. I’m basically a child, remember? I’m not suited toward ridiculous battles like the Shichinin Misaki or the Hyakki Yakou where they scatter curses everywhere and slaughter anyone they run across.”

“Surely there are other ways you can help! Also, that game system and that computer are mine! A Youkai can’t make a contract with the provider. If I die, you can’t access those video sharing sites!!”

“Chehh…”

It seemed that was the only aspect of this that bothered her. The adult-like Zashiki Warashi turned away from the video of a fluffy panda and faced me once more.

“So now you’re negotiating with Youkai. It’s disappointing how much of your innocence you’ve lost. You used to have such bright, pure eyes.”

“You need to stop trying to get by on seniority when you’re cornered.”

“You were cutest when I would give you a bath every day or when I would help you change in the pool changing room.”

“I said stop it!! We humans have no way to win when it comes to seniority!!”

“I really didn’t know what to do when you would grab onto my swimsuit and tug the entire time because you were afraid of getting lost. The problem was that you didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!!” I screamed as my soul was torn down from the inside.

She had had that glamorous body since before my grandfather was born. Those things seemed so risqué when I thought back on them!!

“So is someone really trying to kill you?”

“Unfortunately.”

“What’s the reason this time?” Asked the Zashiki Warashi as she rolled over and her pure white legs were exposed from the disheveled hem of her yukata. “You live in an Intellectual Village not a large city, so running into Youkai is not exactly rare. Especially for you, Shinobu. On that trip to the beach to swim, you got a love letter from a mermaid.”

“…Yeah, and afterwards I was almost dragged down to the bottom of the ocean.”

“Did you do anything to make that Yuki Onna try to haunt you and kill you? Like mentioning that story of a Yuki Onna sparing the man she married.”

“No.” I shook my head. “That’s not it.”

Part 4

After what Madoka had told me, I was of course on my guard.

On the way back from the Sanatorium, I trudged down the mountain road because I was too cheap to pay for the bus fare. Due to thickly grown trees casting too much of a shadow, the area contained none of the solar panels that changed angle like sunflowers. Instead, a small waterway ran alongside the road with a great number of small hydroelectric water wheel generators running off of the natural water that was 300 yen a liter. Even something like that had been carefully calculated out with fluid mechanics to ensure the shape and width kept fallen leaves from clogging up the waterway.

I may have been on my guard, but I had overlooked one obvious fact. The mountain road was the only road back, so I would naturally pass by a certain bus stop near a sharp curve. And if the Yuki Onna I had met before was still standing there, I would of course run into her again.

"…I really am an idiot…"

"So we meet again. Hee hee hee… Perhaps this is destiny. So, how about you try marrying me?"

She looked to be around 13. She had long, pale blue hair and wore a pure white kimono that could easily be mistaken for burial clothes. An odd cracking noise of unknown origin seemed to come from the intentionally old-fashioned bus station bench. The plastic materials may have been undergoing some kind of change due to being frozen.

"…Yukinko was it?"

"I am a Yuki Onna. A Yuki Onna is the representative example of a beautiful Youkai. Please do not confuse a woman of deadly beauty such as myself with one of those brats that like to play with snow. Also, let's get married."

"A flat-chested Yuki Onna like you should probably just switch bodies with a certain large-breasted Zashiki Warashi I know."

As I spoke, I could see a warning light flashing inside my head. I could also feel a definite change in temperature as I backed away from her.

Meeting a Yuki Onna could lead to death.

Unlike the Zashiki Warashi at my house, the Yuki Onna was a Youkai that had killing humans as a primary characteristic. Just as a Zashiki Warashi was known to climb into your futon in the middle of the night and straddle you, a Yuki Onna would kill someone simply because she was a Yuki Onna.

To be blunt, she was more dangerous than some ferocious pet an irresponsible owner had abandoned.

I sorted through a few conditions in my head.

Most people probably know the story of the Yuki Onna more on the level of a picture book or old story rather than as a Youkai tale. And that was the extent of my knowledge as well.

Two men were stranded on a snowy mountain in winter and a Yuki Onna killed the older man. She let the younger man go, but made him promise to never tell anyone what happened. Later, the man married a certain woman and ended up carelessly telling her the story of the Yuki Onna. However, it turned out the woman he married really was the Yuki Onna.

Looking at the story at face value makes the Yuki Onna look rather fickle, but if she had been planning to marry the younger man from the beginning, she actually seems much more meticulous. The story featured several promises both obvious and hidden. For example, if the younger man had married some other woman before the Yuki Onna appeared to him in disguise, she might have bared her fangs at him then.

Since old stories often have morals, one theory states that the Yuki Onna could represent the horrors of a mountain during winter and the marriage promise could represent proper mountain climbing knowledge. With the proper knowledge, a mountain can be enjoyably majestic, but it bares its fangs if you are careless.

But enough about explanations created by city scholars who have never seen a real Youkai.

The problem was that the existence that represented the horrors of a mountain during winter was leisurely sitting on a bench in front of me. Naturally, this was a situation where the conditions could possibly cause her to immediately bare her fangs at me.

I was in a dangerous position.

I decided the best way to avoid carelessly stepping on any landmines would be to not make any promises to her whatsoever. There were some Youkai that you would die from just by seeing it, so it could have been worse.

“…So why is a Yuki Onna like you out in this hot midsummer weather?”

“Will you promise to marry me if I tell you?”

“No, I won’t. And isn’t that rushing things a bit? You can barely even say we’ve met.”

That marriage request was likely a trigger that made her attack. She would ask anyone who met certain requirements to marry her. Any of those who agreed would be bound by promises and frozen to death. I could hardly take her seriously. She was taking marriage too lightly. It was light as air.

The little Yuki Onna looked at me with spiteful eyes.

“If you do not promise to marry me right here and now, I will make sure you die…”

“Geh!? You prepared two paths to attack!?”

If I don’t make that ridiculous promise, I’ll be killed, but if I do make it, she’ll bind me with promises and kill me? Could the characteristics of a Yuki Onna be any worse!?

“I-I’m a minor…”

“Only by human rules. According to Youkai rules, even a verbal promise is enough. So let us get married. Marriage now.”

“I like the human way!! And I don’t think I would last even a day if I was thrown out into the snowy plains you come from!!”

“Then promise to marry me as soon as you are of marrying age according to the Japanese Constitution.”

“Too bad! The Japanese Constitution does not recognize marriage between humans and Youkai, so it'll never be possible!"

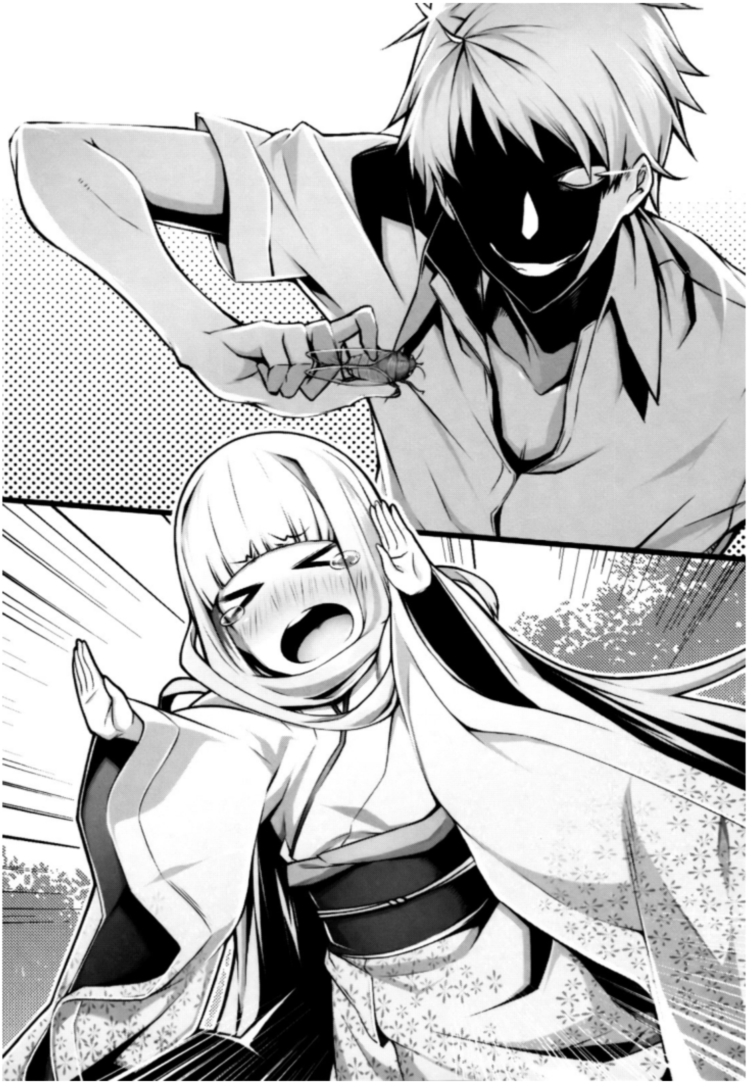
Customarily, Youkai were treated as something similar to humans, but there was no actual legal basis to that. They could not even sign a cell phone contract.

The Yuki Onna tilted her head to the side and said, "So you're saying it can't happen unless the Japanese Constitution is revised for some reason? Heh heh heh heh heh heh heh."

Geh. Not good. I doubt the law will change anytime soon, but I'm afraid of having her come after me in 50 years saying I've broken my promise. She'll look exactly the same in 1000 years, so it's completely possible.

"I won't even discuss marrying someone whose name I don't even know."

"I am #58902385Ra4."



Shit, she's serious. That was her national registration number that no one uses anymore, wasn't it!?

"B-but I also need to know at least one weakness of someone before I'll discuss marrying them."

"I do not like cicadas or concrete dams."

"Take this! Min-min[1] bomber!!"

"Nyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

I grabbed a cicada from a nearby tree and threw it at her. The Yuki Onna fell off the bus stop bench and ran off. I didn't get a good look at her face, but I had a feeling she was crying.

Hmm.

Good thing she was an idiot.

That was one way of driving away a Youkai.

What mattered most was that I had managed not to promise her anything.

“I don’t remember hearing that Yuki Onna don’t like cicadas. Was that a personal weakness rather than one of the entire race?”

With a quizzical look on my face, I started back down the mountain road.

I had made it past the first threat after Madoka’s warning, so I can’t deny that I let my guard down a bit.

However, I would not have been able to avoid what came next even if I had been on my guard.

Immediately afterwards, someone suddenly shot me in the chest with a hunting rifle.

Part 5

The Zashiki Warashi in the bright red yukata rolled over and her glossy hair spread out across the tatami mats.

With a bored look on her face, she said, “I call bullshit on that. If you really had been shot, you wouldn’t have come back home.”

“Okay, fine. I exaggerated a bit. I wasn’t actually shot through the heart.”

“You actually do well in school, but you don’t look like it at all, so try not to say things in such a stupid way.’”

Thanks to that, my nickname was “Intellectual Yakuza”.

But anyway…

“I don’t want to be called stupid by such a good-for-nothing Youkai. And nothing you say sounds remotely Youkai-like anymore. You should be saying things that sound like they are filled with significance and make you sound like you have vast experience from having lived since before the dawn of civilization, not checking the times of net concerts every day!”

“Oh? Would you rather have a debate regarding the range of random numbers X that relates to the frequency with which Youkai appear?”

“Don’t bring up one of the top 10 unsolved problems of the 21st century!! Also, you’re a Youkai, so doesn’t that give you too much of an advantage?”

“You’re saying I should know everything about Youkai just because I am one? How naïve. Shinobu, can you give me the random number range for the genes that determine if a human is male or female as well as explain when, where, and how those genes are expressed?”

“Nhh…”

“There are just things we don’t know. We just live as we are. Neither of us are scholars and we can live perfectly fine without knowing why we were born,” said the Zashiki Warashi with a thin smile. “Also, comments that sound full of significance or ancient experience are not really all that valuable. All of that only sounds so impressive because the differences between modern language and archaic language make things take longer to understand. That so-called significance is nothing more than what you see every day. If you said it in modern language, you would just be describing things everyone already knows. What value is there in forcing those things into old, formal language?”

I got the feeling the conversation would never make progress if I didn’t just give in there.

“…Can we get this conversation back on track?”

“I’d rather digress some more.”

“Why are you such a pain in the ass, you Zashiki Warashi!?”

“Oh, that’s another thing. I’d like to complain about being referred to simply as ‘Zashiki Warashi’. I don’t like how I was given a personal name and yet no one uses it. It feels like I have a stack of business cards that never grows any smaller.”

Don’t act like you know what you’re talking about when you’ve never worked for a business.

“What was your number again?”

“No, not the number string the government gave me. Did you forget my personal name is Yukari?”

“…Is it? Well, no point in remembering that. Zashiki Warashi gets the point across well enough.”

“What if there are two other Zashiki Warashi standing on either side of me?”

“In that case, good-for-nothing Zashiki Warashi or indoor Zashiki Warashi should work.”

“…”

Still smiling, the black-haired Zashiki Warashi that looked good in the bright red yukata fell silent.

And then she suddenly pinched my right nipple.

“Ky-kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

My entire body started to tremble.

Wh-what!? Is some unexplored door beginning to open!?

“…People’s names are important, aren’t they?”

“Wait, stop…Ayayaya, don’t twist!!”

“Aren’t they?”

“Ahh, ahh!! Yes, they certainly are, Yukari-sama!!”

“Fine then.”

With that strange approval, she finally removed her fingers from that protuberance of my body.

While trying to catch my breath I said, “C-can we…Can we finally…get back to the main topic?”

“I still want to digress some more…”

“No, thank you!! Let’s bring this back!! We’re backing up!!”

I had no idea how far off topic we would get if I let that Zashiki Warashi maintain control of the conversation any longer. Despite how I look, I try to be at least a bit on the S side of things! I had no intention of seeing those as two sides of the same coin and therefore developing in both directions, so my only option was to forcefully regain control.

“O-okay…How far did I get?”

“The difference in sensitivity between the right one and left one.”

“No!! Oh, I remember! I was shot by a hunting rifle!!”

That was when she had called bullshit.

However…

“The truth of the matter is that someone really did fire one at me.”

“Who? The Yuki Onna?”

“Someone. I don’t know who, but a human. I was shot at by a human. Only a human would go to the effort of specifically using a hunting rifle. They were clearly being cautious of the laws.”

“I suppose. In this Intellectual Village where a bunch of grapes costs 30,000 yen, the extermination of harmful animals like crows and boars is an everyday event. It’s true that even if the gunshot of a hunting rifle is heard throughout the village, no one will think some dangerous incident has occurred.”

That was what made rural areas so scary.

Normally, people would assume something was horribly wrong just by hearing a gunshot. However, the norm here was a bit different. The fact that no one would be surprised to see someone wandering around with a gun makes you wonder if the village was even part of Japan.

“So who was it? Did you happen to catch the Chinese mafia burying a mutilated corpse?”

“They wouldn’t bury someone in an area where nature is so highly maintained.”

“Then who was it?” asked the Zashiki Warashi.

I sighed and then answered.

“*An inheritance agent.*”

Part 6

My first thought upon hearing the gunshot of the hunting rifle was that someone was dealing with some dangerous animal. The sound hurt my ears meaning it was nearby, but I was in the mountain. A hunter working nearby was not too surprising.

It was some things other than the gunshot that seemed strange.

First of all, there was an electric car driving up the mountain road. Intellectual Village was an incarnation of the ecological and health booms, so that in itself was not too strange. However, it *was* unusual for the engine sound effect, meant to warn those who could not see it, to be deactivated. This meant it was approaching silently.

Second of all, the back window of the electric car was open and a man wearing a suit was leaning out and holding a hunting rifle. I had never heard of a hunter shooting from within a car, and someone pursuing a dangerous animal would not be wearing a suit. Hunters always walked through the mountains and wore bright orange vests. This was to reduce the danger of being confused for a bear and shot by a fellow hunter.

Third of all, a portion of the bus stop bench next to me shattered along with the gunshot.

The shot had not merely mistakenly gone my way.

The man was clearly aiming for me!

"…!?"

Who?

Why?

There was of course a reason I had been able to start moving before answering the questions that appeared in my mind.

This was because I could not properly imagine what kind of destruction a hunting rifle could do. Even if it had shattered a bench right in front of me, I could not imagine how much pain I would feel if it pierced my own flesh.

If it had been a knife or a metal bat, I would have been able to clearly imagine the pain and therefore would have frozen up in fear.

The hunting rifle's power was simply so great that the silently approaching electric car seemed more intimidating. Since I felt the road was dangerous, I looked past the guardrail on the sharp curve of the mountain road and felt fear grab at my heart due to the 5 meter drop there.

The fact that the danger was so great actually gave me a way out.

I did not give a single thought to whether I could actually escape the hunting rifle by jumping from that small cliff.

Instead, I leaned over the guardrail simply in order to avoid the car headed my way.

I did not exactly jump.

I lost my balance and fell rolling down the 70 degree slope before I had a chance to mentally prepare myself.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

My vision spun around and around and around.

Dull pain tore across my entire body.

My breathing stopped.

A stinging pain spread across every inch of my skin.

As I rolled down, I broke the branches of short thickets and the smell of the grass I was crushing gained a dark red iron-like scent to it. It didn't feel like I had broken any bones, but I had no strength. My breathing was erratic. It reminded me of the body blow I had received in a punishment game once. I had overdone it. The pain and suffering was so great that I completely forgot about the hunting rifle and the electric car.

Reality was forced back into my mind by an explosive noise from overhead.

It was the sound of the double-barreled hunting rifle being fired once more.

You're not letting me off the hook after I fell down a cliff!? I'm just a high school boy. I can't think of anything I've done that would warrant going this far!!

"Dammit…!!"

At any rate, my only option is to find some cover and make a run for it!!

I dragged my aching body along and frantically started rustling through the underbrush and making my way between trees. That was when I realized it. If the man had taken time and aimed at me, he would have hit me. He had lost sight of me, and that previous shot had been to see if I would react.

I had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker.

The noise I made as I moved had to have given away my position.

I could feel myself paling, but what was done was done.

I guess I have no choice but to run to safety!!

The suited attacker would be hesitant to jump down from that height. However, he would eventually work up his resolve. I had to get as much distance as I could in that time.

Normally thinking, I could not escape someone who had a hunting rifle by running. However, it was too soon to give up. The Type 32 from Yasuda Firearms the attacker was using was a shotgun. It was the same one the old man next door used. Compared to a standard rifle type, it had a short range. On top of that, the area was filled with high class Japanese cypress trees. The more distance I got, the denser the cover between us would be. From 40 to 50 meters would be the deadliest range. Once I made it 100 meters away, I would likely survive even if I was hit.

I may have been completely wrong about that.

That may have just been the mistaken reckoning of an amateur high school boy.

But whether I was wrong or not, that hopeful view kept me from freezing up.

I ran through the trees and trampled the underbrush while pulling out my cell phone. I could only hope for the bare minimum of functionality as even the lens of its camera was broken. (I had a smartphone too, but the Zashiki Warashi usually swiped it to use as a music player.) The nice thing about an Intellectual Village was that you got three bars of signal even in the mountains. For an instant, I was worried they could track me using it, but I decided it wasn't worth worrying about. After all, the attacker was close enough to actually see me.

However, I did not call 110. Rescue would never make it in time. The ones who would take action first if I reported it would be the small police department in the village. Only one old man would be there at that time. If that old man was enough of an elite soldier to handle this situation, the people making high class fruits would not pay so much to hire armed security guards.

I made the call without hesitation.

My classmate answered with a voice lively enough to put the school sports teams to shame.

“What is it? Did you forget something?”

“Madoka-san. I have something I'd like to ask you!”

“I haven't done the summer homework if that's what it's about.”

The thunderous roar of a gunshot rang out nearby. The dull sound of bark being ripped from trees continued afterwards. I ran on with the belief that my groundless, hopeful view was accurate. I had no choice but to believe it even if it was groundless. If I had let my fear catch up to me, I would have frozen up. And so I thought only about the convenient things that would allow me to survive. I fled. As I did so, I shouted into the phone half in desperation.

“You said meeting that Yuki Onna was dangerous!!”

“Right, right.”

“Well, you didn't know anything about those inheritance agents being even more dangerous, did you!?”

“Wow, Shinobu-kun. So you've already figured that much out.”

“I'll fucking kill you!! Why didn't you tell me that from the beginning!?”

I heard the sound of flowing water and grimaced. If there was a river, the trees acting as my cover would thin out. The danger of being shot would increase. However, there was no stopping my legs. I knew it was dangerous, but I had no choice but to continue straight on.

Whether she knew my situation or not, Madoka's voice was utterly indifferent as she said, "Eh? But I was hoping for a good story. It would've been a complete waste to tell you that beforehand."

"…!!"

Thank you for the courage to live on☆

I'm gonna survive this no matter what so I can give you a good punch!!

"Inheritance agents advertise their services as 'successfully transferring the client's inheritance to the client's person of choice regardless of the legal order'. I guess you could think of them as a group of lawyers that are a bit more active than most. I explained that much here at the Sanatorium."

"They wouldn't be carrying around a hunting rifle if they were a proper business! I'm guessing there's some darker aspect to this!"

"The problem lies in their method of transferring the inheritance. Doing so while ignoring the legal order would normally be impossible. That means the client cannot give everything directly to their grandchild while skipping over their son. They know that would be stopped by the courts."

The trees ended.

I stopped without thinking and found a small river and rocky riverside. Both together were about 30 meters across. However, I would not be able to keep up my usual pace across those hard rocks and in the water. But if I hung around, the attacker would catch up and shoot me.

"The clients first transfer their assets to the inheritance agent. This is a donation of assets rather than an inheritance. Sending it to some third person at that point is no different than a company giving it to a specific individual, so it can be given to a grandson or mistress or whoever else. The amount given is less due to a donation tax having to be paid twice. However, the inheritance agent can make back the amount lost through investments."

"You mean like that day trading you love so much?"

"When it's related to an Intellectual Village, they can also deal in high quality agriculture futures."

The sound of someone moving through the underbrush and branches gradually approached.

I had no time to hesitate.

I knew it was dangerous, but I charged out onto the rocky river bank.

"If they succeeded in that, they wouldn't be wandering around with a hunting rifle. So did their investments fail and now they've lost the assets they're supposed to hand over?"

"No, they never had any intentions of giving those assets to the specified person. After being legally given those assets, they just keep them for themselves."

"Then they're just a bunch of con artists!!

"Exactly. However, they make hundreds of millions if not billions of yen per job. With that much money on the line, they'll be willing to get rid of someone who has become inconvenient."

I ran across the river bank covered in round rocks and then charged into the small river. The flow was stronger than I had expected. I continued forward while making sure my feet weren't taken out from under me.

Don't come.

Don't come.

Don't come.

If that man with the hunting rifle from that corrupt lawyer group made his way out of the trees, it was almost certain he would shoot me in the back.

"Okay, I get that they have a reason to kill someone. But why me!? I don't have any evidence of their dishonesty and I never chanced across anything incriminating!!"

I had seen those inheritance agents going back and forth within the

Sanatorium, so had I seen anything dangerous there? I couldn't think of anything. I couldn't think of a single thing I could have seen that would warrant shooting me with a hunting rifle and disposing of my body somewhere.

"Wait. Wait!!"

"What?" replied Madoka.

"What's the connection here?"

The water filling my shoes felt quite uncomfortable. I couldn't believe that people in the cities put a 300 yen price tag on a liter of the stuff. Even so, I continued on. I made it across the small river and started running across the smooth stones once more.

"You said the Yuki Onna was dangerous, right? Is there some connection between her and the inheritance agents!?"

"*That's exactly what I was saying.*"

"!?"

A rustling came from a thicket on the other side of the clear stream from me.

At about the same moment, I made it across the rocky bank and charged into the trees of the forest.

I felt the gunshot reverberate in my stomach more than I heard it. Wild birds took flight all around me.

I had just barely made it.

But there was no guarantee I would make it next time.

Crossing the river had slowed my pace down by too much. I had somehow managed to hide in a thicket, but I was too close. The density of the trees around me was too low to act as proper cover.

A lead bullet would reach me.

However, I had a means of victory.

In the old days, rivers were often used as borders between lands. The simplest example is probably the borders of a prefecture or a city.

Private property was no exception.

And in an Intellectual Village where the agriculture was of such high quality that a bunch of grapes cost 30,000 yen, people made sure to have security networks that could protect their crops.

I only had to raise one hand.

The instant it was caught by the infrared sensor, something happened.

Something rose up in a straight line to block my path.

It was a wire security net with high voltage electricity running through it.

It was likely meant to keep out both dangerous animals and thieves. The beasts would continue on and be roasted, but a human would notice the danger and step back.

To make sure that the humans did not escape, a similar high voltage net rose up behind me on the rocky river bank. I was surrounded by the net walls.

I heard the slight static of speakers installed in the area being powered on.

They were most likely set to play a recording when the intruder was concluded to be human since nothing was "roasted".

"Beyond this point is a mandarin orange orchard owned by Tanaka Farms. Entry of all unauthorized personnel is forbidden. Members of security are being dispatched, but Tanaka Farms is not liable for any harm done by the high voltage current before you. I repeat…"

I heard the sound of someone walking through a thicket.

The suited man carrying a hunting rifle appeared.

However, he had heard the announcement too. He had to know the unrelated security guards would be arriving before long. Even if he killed me there, he did not have time to retrieve the body and dispose of all traces of the crime.

We glared at each other for a few seconds.

Finally, the suited man slowly backed away while still aiming the hunting rifle at me. He then clicked his tongue and ran off.

It may have been due to being surrounded by those high voltage nets, but the cell phone connection had ended.

While waiting for rescue to arrive on that mountain, I muttered quietly to myself.

“…A Package, hm?”

Part 7

The Zashiki Warashi in the bright red yukata spoke with her cheeks stuffed full of the ohagi my overall small granny had brought us.

“Fi’m funfry. (I’m hungry).”

“What kind of starving character are you? And could you actually listen to my story?”

“I wonder why people fall for scams,” she said in a tone that made it sound like a Youkai would never fall for one.

She then brought another ohagi to her mouth. She was still lying down, so it was rather rude.

“It’s so obvious that’s dangerous from the moment you have to hand your money over to someone else temporarily. It’s not like you can demand your money back after giving it to them.”

“The ideal situation for a con artist is not some proper method that no one would find suspicious. They prefer something that looks good at the time and seems worth it *even if it is a bit risky*. That bit is what clouds over people’s rational decision making ability.”

“So something like a chance at being one of the clever winners in life?”

“Or they say they’re giving you some special advice because you were one of the lucky few to be chosen.”

My words put an oddly bewitching smile on the Zashiki Warashi’s face.

“So the desire to give your inheritance to someone other than your proper family is an attractive enough opportunity to cloud people’s judgment?”

Admittedly, that left a bad taste in my mouth too, but I would have preferred she did not look at me like I was the representative of humanity’s evil intentions.

“But from what you’ve said, they’re just a group of con artists.”

“Yes, and from how smoothly Madoka was able to explain it all, people must be beginning to catch on to their M.O. It’s probably at the stage where people just need some proof.”

“It’s that Yuki Onna that Madoka mentioned that catches my interest,” she said. “Since you spotting her developed into that hunting rifle attack, that Yuki Onna must be an important factor to those inheritance agents. Which means…”

“Which means it might have something to do with a Package.”

Part 8

After the middle-aged man who named himself the head of Tanaka Farms drove me in his electric-powered light truck to the sweets shop at the base of the mountain, I called Madoka at the Sanatorium once more.

“Ah ha! The connection ended so suddenly I thought you had died♪”

“Well, I’m glad you’re delighted enough to let your character blur like crazy. But prepare yourself, I’m gonna give you quite the spanking later.”

“I think your character is getting a bit blurred too, Shinobu-kun. Anyway, do you still need something?”

“It’s about these inheritance agents,” I said quickly. “If you knew they had something to do with that Yuki Onna, then I assume something must have happened in the Sanatorium. Tell me.”

“Hmm? I have a good idea about what’s going on, but I have no proof,” replied Madoka with no hesitation. “Remember how I told you there was a room here where anyone who stayed in it would die?”

“Yeah.”

“*It was actually never determined which room that was*. There are a few theories, but who knows which – if any – of them are correct.”

“But for a rumor like that to get started, something strange must have happened. Something that would suggest the involvement of a Yuki Onna.”

“Yes. It was nothing more than some old men and women getting frostbite in the middle of summer, though.”

“…Is that even possible?”

“You can ignore all ecological issues and freely set the air conditioning here and people are often bedridden, so yes. A cool breeze may have been blown onto one part of their skin continually for hours and hours. However, once it happened 4 or 5 times, something else was clearly going on. The Sanatorium is both an attraction and in the service industry. Having incidents like that continue would hurt the image of their brand, so it seems the workers were a bit panicked."

"But this rumor calmed down."

"Yes, but the cause was never actually determined. If this was being maliciously done by someone, they must have completely stopped."

"And you think this was the inheritance agents?"

"They were already coming and going when the frostbite scares occurred, but I haven't seen any clear link between them. However, the old men and women who got frostbite all had immense fortunes. They were certainly the type the inheritance agents would want to target."

"One question. You said the inheritance agents were coming and going at the time of the frostbite scares. Were there any victims of their scam in the Sanatorium during that time?"

"You're quite perceptive." It sounded like Madoka was smiling on the other side of the phone. "There were no victims at the time. From what I could tell, they had approached a few tempting marks, but did not manage to get any money from them. …However, their scam grew quite bountiful once the frostbite scare had died down. I haven't actually spoken with any of the victims though."

"I knew it," I muttered without thinking.

That left one possibility.

"The initial frostbite scares were tests for a Package. After they fine-tuned the power and the breadth of conditions, they began the real scam."

"A Package…" said Madoka.

"*A criminal system put together by humans using the characteristics and conditions of Youkai*. It's the stereotypical form for cases of spiritual harm."

A cash card that can draw out an unlimited amount of money. A knife that can kill any number of people without the criminal ever getting caught.

Normally thinking, those items were impossibilities that could never exist in reality. However, that sort of thing could be achieved by cleverly mixing in the powers of those who were not normal.

The specific item seen on the surface was just the tip of the iceberg.

When the large gears of a Youkai and a criminal organization came together to form a massive perfect crime system, it was known as a Package.

Think of items like the Uchide no Kozuchi seen in old stories or the bullets created with demonic powers spoken of in a famous opera. Now, imagine such things could be put together as “items without form” as a means of committing fraud.

The worst part was that the Youkai used to put it together had no idea they were committing crimes or causing people problems.

A Yuki Onna would kill you if you spoke of being spared and would then disguise herself as a woman and marry you. A group of con men would very much want the use of that compulsion through promises. And since she would kill anyone who told, they had a means of avoiding anyone taking legal action against them.

The real problem was that the Yuki Onna’s promises revolved around the idea of marriage.

If they were free to switch out the marriage part, they could use it to force any kind of unfair financial contract on people.

“How did they get the people to make the promise?” I groaned. “Those frostbite scares must have been due to the promises failing. Or perhaps the people refused to promise. They might have been bringing the Yuki Onna directly into the Sanatorium at that time. But the inheritance agents must have thought of a different way of handling it once the frostbite scares suddenly stopped.”

“Are you about to ask me if I can think of anything likely?”

“Oh, you’re an esper!”

“Sorry, but I can’t think of anything!”

“Damn you!!”

I felt like crushing my cell phone in my grip, but my vision of the situation was not clear enough to know exactly what I wanted her to find. It may have been wrong of me to expect any results from Madoka when I could not even give her proper instructions.

I had no choice.

“I think I’ll head back to the Sanatorium. Will I make it in time for standard visiting hours?”

“Wait, wait. Shinobu-kun, weren’t you targeted by a hunting rifle?”

“That’s why I want to end this as quickly as possible. I’d rather not still have one of those targeting me while I walk down a dark path at night.”

“I see. Well, you’ll likely get here in time. If there are any problems, I can use my status as a regular customer to vouch for you. Also, you should probably use the bus next time. And not one that stops at every stop. One of the expensive nonstop ones. If you don’t have to stop on that mountain road, you’ll be at less risk. That won’t completely eliminate the risk of attack, though.”

“I’ll do that. …Actually, are you safe there?”

“The Sanatorium is filled with the wealthy, so its security is top notch. And if things are dangerous here, you’ll be attacked before you leave.”

“Thanks for that unpleasant bit of evidence.”

I ended the call.

This was not just a group of con men that targeted old people. With the situation growing more and more dangerous, I wearily turned around and headed back along the mountain road I had just come down from.

I was heading right back into the clutches of death.

Part 9

Packages had one major problem.

“Bon bobon bon bobobobon bonsai!”

“Don’t lose interest, Zashiki Warashi!! My story isn’t over yet!!”

As she ignored me, the Zashiki Warashi hummed, adjusted the position of the ultraviolet light emitting a bluish-white light, and used a dropper to add nutrients to a clear pot filled with a watery substance. A bonsai itself did match the yukata-wearing Youkai, but the overall SF feel to it all did not match at all.

Incidentally, I have my suspicions that this hobby of hers is why my grandfather has taken such a liking to her despite her being utterly worthless.

“Well, the farther along you get, the less it seems to concern me. How about you just submit this to one of those online question sites?”

“I just can’t trust the know-it-alls that write answers to those things…”

And don’t get off topic.

Can you keep ignoring me when I bring out these puppy dog eyes?

“…Wh-what’s wrong, Shinobu? You’ve got the same look in your eyes as a snake eyeing its prey. Have your sexual urges as a teenager finally gotten the better of you?”

“Enough of this. Can we please just get back to my story?”

“Hmm. So this Package gets people to transfer ownership of their assets by using the promises of a Yuki Onna?” The Zashiki Warashi in the bright red yukata finally turned back to me after finishing with her SF bonsai. “If they’ve developed this into a Package, are these inheritance agents ultimately after you-know-what?”

“Since they’re still coming and going to and from the Sanatorium even after some suspicions, it’s entirely possible.”

“Exporting the Package…”

Yes.

A Package was a criminal plan put together by humans and constructed from the special characteristics and conditions of Youkai. Once one was established, the plan and methodology could be sold as a product. It was the same as how a method of fraud would spread throughout the country.

Naturally, society would grow distorted if these things spread.

This would go well beyond just the Sanatorium.

This was different from someone owning the one and only Uchide no Kozuchi. Packages merely used the powers of Youkai and were created by humans. As long as the person had the desire to complete one and the techniques and materials needed to construct it, anyone could create it. For better or for worse.

“It seems the inheritance agents have already ripped off some wealthy old folks. They’ve made a killing. They may be at the stage where they are planning to sell their Package to *an even larger criminal organization* in order to change their identities and disappear.”

During the frostbite scares, the inheritance agents had started to fail in their scam and that exposed them to a serious risk. That had likely not been part of their plan. It was possible their ultimate objective had already shifted from “make tons of money” to “escape safely”.

“If a flaw is found in their Package after they sell it, *the large criminal organization* could very well try to hunt them down. They might be staying at the Sanatorium despite the risk so they can continue to carefully debug it,” said the Zashiki Warashi.

“It’s also possible the *large criminal organization* sent them to the Sanatorium to assemble the Package in the first place…No, that’s unlikely. If it had all just been testing, they wouldn’t have had to target actual rich people.”

“Hmm. So the inheritance agents thought it was possible you had noticed the connection between the scams at the Sanatorium and the Yuki Onna, so they came to get rid of you. They wouldn’t want any interference that could alter the essentials of their Package before they complete it.”

“Precisely.”

“…This is sounding more and more dangerous. Now we have some *large criminal organization* involved too. From the way this sounds, I wouldn’t be surprised to hear about a nighttime shootout at a wharf.”

“I know, right?”

“And a deadly Yuki Onna is involved, too. Since the marks they can’t get money from are getting frozen to death, they might be able to cause an intentional failure and use the Yuki Onna offensively. This is a combination of an organization, guns, and the supernatural. I wonder if the local police can handle this.”

“That’s why I’m consulting you, you good-for-nothing Zashiki Warashi. Honestly, why did I have to meet that Yuki Onna at the worst possible time?”

“If you have some huge battle awaiting you, there’s no place for me there. Bon bobon bobobobobon bonsai!”

“I told you not to lose interest!!”

Part 10

I used an electric bus to return to the Sanatorium.

The men in suits were busy preparing their scam inside and they looked shocked to see me. However, the armed guards directly hired by the wealthy occupants of the Sanatorium would act if the men pulled out a hunting rifle there. They trembled, but they were unable to do anything to me as I passed by them.

“Madoka.”

“Hey, there.”

I met up with my classmate once more in that waiting room that had strict security that was not visible at first glance.

“You mentioned divulging the details of the Package using the Yuki Onna, but what exactly are you going to investigate? Just so you know, it will be difficult to ask anyone here questions. The Sanatorium is like a hotel for the eccentric and wealthy, so no one speaks with their neighbors. My word only has any sway over the workers here, so don’t count on me being able to do anything.”

“I don’t think I’ll need that.” I shook my hand in the air. “The main gist of this Package has to do with promises. If you tell anyone she spared you, she’ll kill you, but she also disguises herself as a woman and comes to marry you. They use that double setup to get people to transfer their assets over.”

The marriage in this context did not refer to a legal state that required a marriage registration. It was a verbal promise of marriage that acted as the Yuki Onna’s trigger to attack. In other words, it was not the marriage itself that was important. It was the promise of marriage. For that reason, the marriage that seemed at the center of it all could be replaced with something else.

“It sounds ideal, doesn’t it? After setting up a defensive line by preventing the person from telling anyone about the group of con artists, they close in with their ridiculous deal. And if you refuse, you receive a penalty. By cleverly altering the characteristics and conditions of a Yuki Onna, they can create a model case of massive fraud that will never come to light.”

"But wouldn't that lead to a lot of people dying?" I frowned. "If they just tell people they will have complete control over their assets and insist there is nothing fishy about it, anyone who agreed would have to be quite an idiot. Anyone with half a brain would find it suspicious. And it seems the inheritance agents did fail initially."

"But if you refuse to promise, you get killed, right? Then…"

"Then you would expect some people to have refused and died. *Some people would not believe that a Yuki Onna was really involved*."

"Ah," said Madoka suddenly.

She must have realized something.

"The frostbite scares," I said. "Most likely, they originally either used the Yuki Onna directly or the agents brought the deal directly to the old people. And they failed. The old people very nearly died from the penalty. It seems they managed to avoid any deaths by messing with the characteristics and conditions of the Yuki Onna to a certain extent, but *it was still too powerful*."

"And so the inheritance agents gave up on that method."

"They began to use a method of getting people to make the promise that would not raise any questions. If you don't feel any hesitation to make the promise, the old people need not die due to the penalty. That initial entrance is the problem. After the marks are caught in the Yuki Onna's promise, the agents are free to do as they please."

"Is there a way to do that?" Madoka seemed skeptical. "The inheritance agents clearly aren't all that skilled at talking people into things. Even with the Yuki Onna involved, they managed to screw this up during those frostbite scares. No matter how much help a poor talker gets, they're never going to be perfect."

"True. That's why they don't do it through talk. The targets don't even know they've made the promise."

"…?"

"I saw this method in a Package I ran across before." I paused for a second. "*You can make someone promise something by hiding it amid the user agreement for free software*. No one reads it, but you can't use the software unless you agree. The promise is hidden in the long text."

"You don't mean…"

"You have one here, right?" I looked around. "The Sanatorium must have a resident agreement. Do you remember looking through it? If they added a clause in it to have people make a promise with some strange Youkai, it would be too convenient for these people."

Apparently, the original resident agreement was kept at the Sanatorium's front desk. Madoka may have had no influence with the other residents, but she had enough pull with the workers to allow me to look through that telephone book-like resident agreement.

–While Party A is using the facilities managed by Party B, Party A is obligated to always disclose and explain any objects brought within the facilities.

–While Party A is using the facilities managed by Party B, Party B will do its best to care for Party A's possessions. However, this is an endeavor, not an obligation. As such, any loss of or damage to Part A's possessions while using the facilities managed by Party B do not produce any liability for Party B whatsoever.

–While Party A is using the facilities managed by Party B, Party A is obligated to treat appropriately the equipment and fixtures managed by Party B. If Party A is negligent in this obligation and Party B's equipment or fixtures experience damage, Party A must compensate for the entire cost of repairs or replacement.

"…Why are legal agreements and contracts always written with such stiff language?"

"It's so you'll miss what it means while skimming through it. Look, how is this fair? If a resident's wallet is lost, the institution isn't responsible, but if something in here is damaged, the resident has to pay for it."

"But I don't see any sign of anything related to the Yuki Onna."

The part saying "any loss of or damage to Party A's possessions while using the facilities managed by Party B do not produce any liability for Party B whatsoever" was certainly unfair, but it *lacked something* that would be needed for the Yuki Onna to take the target's assets.

"Did we misread it?"

"No…" I thought for a bit. "Even if they rewrote the entire original here at the front desk, that would cause everyone in the Sanatorium to fall under the Yuki Onna scam. And that includes you, Madoka. However, I haven't heard anything about them making that much money."

"So you're saying the Sanatorium resident agreement theory was a dead end?"

"They have to have resident agreements other than this one. This place is a "sanatorium" in name only. It's actually a hotel for strange, eccentric people."

Yes.

At the time of the frostbite scares, the inheritance agents had changed their methods rather than continuing on. They must not have wanted the panic to spread any further than it had to. Even if it would make a lot of money, the possibility of drawing suspicion from the police would grow if they dragged the entire Sanatorium into it. As such, success had not seemed likely. It was almost as if the group of con artists had recoiled from the possibility that, if worse came to worst, everyone in the Sanatorium could have ended up frozen to death.

That was why the inheritance agents had worked to contain any damages that they might create.

Their promises would be ones that only affected their specific target.

They would use a resident agreement that they could narrow down to affect only one person.

"Do the rooms here contain a booklet that introduces the Sanatorium to newcomers? Instructions on using room service or the internet might be included in it. If a file like that exists, it probably includes a copy of the resident agreement."

"Come to think of it…"

“Also, that simplified resident agreement doesn’t need to be signed or stamped with your seal. Usually, *you automatically agree to its conditions just by entering the room.*”

When I entered Madoka’s room, there was indeed a thick binder on a small table. As expected, the introduction to the Sanatorium included a simplified version of the resident agreement.

“If all rooms have one of these binders, they could switch out the binder in the room of their target.”

“We can’t check other resident’s rooms though.”

“Are there any rooms left empty after an unnatural departure? If you tell anyone you were spared, she kills you. Afterwards, she disguises herself as a woman and comes to marry you. Even with the Yuki Onna’s double setup, nothing is stopping people from leaving without telling anyone anything.”

“I might be able to get permission from a worker to check an empty room.”

Madoka asked a passing female worker who unlocked an empty room for us. (I had to wonder just how much pull my classmate held in that place.) We then stepped inside.

“It’s possible we were trapped in a labyrinth of promises the instant we set foot in this room. We need to be careful.”

“I will, but this is a Yuki Onna, right? I am a woman myself, after all.”

“The attack trigger just uses the word marriage, but it seems to actually be rather vague, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps. But the resident agreement in the room only applies to the person that signed a lease for the room with the facility’s owner, so it has nothing to do with us.”

I hoped she was right, but it was possible the group of con artists had changed the contents up quite a bit. It was entirely possible common knowledge did not apply.

I reached for the binder and checked within.

The text designed to make you want to go to sleep continued identically to the one at the front desk for a bit, but I started to notice some things that seemed out of place.

Since the font was identical, it was hard to tell, but there were some clauses added in that I had not seen in the one at the front desk.

"This mentions a Party C in addition to the Party A and Party B."

"Is that the Yuki Onna?"

"It might be the inheritance agents."

The text was already written so as to make it hard to understand, but the fraud group had added further trickery on top of that. The text almost seemed to get all mixed up in my head, but I somehow managed grasp the meaning.

–While Party A is using the facilities managed by Party B, Party A must always respect Party A's relationship with Party C.

–Party C views the relationship with Party A as being revised to one of transferring all financial assets.

–Party A's losses shall be social losses and Party C must carry out all punishments through financial actions.

–As Party C cannot legally enter into a financial contract, the aforementioned financial actions shall be carried out by the inheritance agents in her place.

"Here we go. I guess the term 'relationship' takes the place of marriage. It is true that the order of inheritance for assets changes when two people get married, but…"

"This part about losses probably changes the Yuki Onna's penalty of death to one of social death through losing all of one's money."

"And they use the fact that Youkai can't even sign a cell phone contract to transfer all the money over to the inheritance agents."

To summarize:

The resident using the room containing the modified binder would automatically become married to the Yuki Onna. The target's assets would become jointly owned by the target and the Yuki Onna. This essentially meant she had taken all of the target's money.

Also, if the target refused or tried to discuss it with someone else, they would receive a financial punishment severe enough to give them a social "death".

Either way, a large amount of money was given to the Yuki Onna. However, the Yuki Onna could not open a bank account, so the inheritance agents would take control of the inheritance in her place.

In the end, the fraud group would have all the money.

Just with the presence of the binder, the promise was made, so the Yuki Onna's power could be used without her actually being there.

I wondered if the Yuki Onna even understood what the current version of the Package was.

"Oh? So the target loses his inheritance whether this succeeds or fails? Then there might be some people who decide to sacrifice themselves in order to reveal what is going on."

"The penalty is merely said to be financial, it doesn't specify an amount. If it succeeds, the target will have all their assets taken, but if it fails and they are punished, they might end up with a severe debt."

If the financial punishment was severe enough to lead to the black market loans of a *large criminal organization*, that would fit the description of a social death.

That was a situation more frightening to humans than freezing to death on a winter mountain.

"Well, that pretty much settles it."

"But do we have any real proof that Party C refers to the Yuki Onna?"

"I think so."

I pointed toward one piece of text in the thick binder.

It read:

–Party C dislikes the summer, so she hates cicadas which are a symbol of the aforementioned season.

Part 11

“Hm? I need to set something to record. They’re showing the Chronograph of Hell late tonight, and I don’t want to miss it.”

“Do it in your own room!! I’m recording a foreign drama, so don’t hog the tuner!!”

“…Well, it sounds like you found out how the Yuki Onna’s Package worked. At this rate, it doesn’t seem like you need me at all.”

“Do you actually want to help despite all the complaining you do…?”

This one may be a pain in the ass, but does the Zashiki Warashi race as a whole want to help out their households? In that case, is her mind tsun but her instincts are dere?

Despite those hopeful thoughts of mine…

“No, I want to know why you’ve forced me to listen to all this. I could have used this time to get my character from Level 7 to Level 8.”

“I had a feeling that was it, you indoor Youkai. If you don’t listen to me, I’ll send all the game systems to Madoka’s place so you can’t play with them, dammit.”

She clung to me and looked like she was about to cry.

That Youkai needed entertainment as much as she did water or oxygen.

“But those inheritance agents were trying to export their Package to a *large criminal organization* in order to get help in escaping, right? Would they really leave you alone while you were trying to uncover their methods?”

“That’s the thing.” I leaned forward. “That was the biggest problem in the end.”

“It’s ironic how greedy humans can be much more frightening than Youkai.”

"In both Rokubu Goroshi and Yonaki Ishi, the villain is a human drowning in greed. In fact, Youkai and the supernatural only really come into play in order to give an ending to the story of some horrible person."

"If karma worked as well as it does in old stories, the world would be a much nicer place," said the Zashiki Warashi uninterestedly. "So I take it the inheritance agents finally took action."

"Yes, they did."

A chill ran down my spine.

I knew being frightened would not change the situation, but feelings had a way of not being controlled by reason.

The most obvious example of something that gave people such irrational fear was Youkai like the Zashiki Warashi or the Yuki Onna.

I was faced with human greed that would even use that fear to make a profit.

"I was in a pinch. I was in a real pinch."

"It's a shame that high schoolers these days have such a limited vocabulary."

Part 12

I had a very bad feeling about something.

The feeling had no specific basis and I could hardly put together a countermeasure from a simple premonition, so that statement was relatively meaningless. However, it was something like being carried towards an incinerator on a slowly moving conveyer belt. The fact that you were not going to be killed immediately made the whole thing feel all the more uncomfortable.

When we left the empty room after checking the binder, Madoka frowned and gave voice to the reason behind my unease.

"…The inheritance agents are gone."

"Seriously?"

The situation was advancing.

Just like with cancer, it was too late by the time the pain came to the surface.

A young female worker was jogging down the passageway toward us.

"Kotemitsu-san, Kotemitsu-san."

"Hey. What is it?"

Kotemitsu Madoka looked toward the female worker when her family name was called.

"I have some news that might concern your visitor."

"Did something happen?"

"The bus that heads from here to the base of the mountain got a flat tire, so it will likely be running late."

Geh.

So that's how we're doing this?

"Given the distance, you can likely make it to the base of the mountain by sunset on foot, but if you have plans, one of the workers can take you by car.”

“Wait, wait. Could you please give me a second to think about this?”

I politely cut off the female worker, grabbed Madoka’s hand, and pulled her a bit away. There, we began speaking in private.

“That had to have been the inheritance agents. They’re planning to have me ‘accidentally’ shot by a hunting rifle on my way back. That’s why they took out the bus to eliminate that hole in their plan.”

“How about you take the workers up on their offer?”

“They’d just shoot the worker too. They’ve decided to be a bit bolder in their methods. Madoka, how many inheritance agents were there coming and going to and from here?”

“Hm? I don’t remember exactly, but I think there were 10 to 20 of them.”

“Then we need to assume they might surround me while all armed with hunting rifles. The mountain road is the only path back. They can just scatter broken glass over the road to stop the car and then shoot it until it’s nothing but scrap metal.”

“…How about you call in a helicopter?”

That was a rich investor for you. She thought about things on a completely different scale.

However, I shook my head.

“If one of their hunting rifles is an actual rifle rather than a shotgun, that won’t work. That would be enough to shoot through the glass or plate of a civilian helicopter.”

Intellectual Villages had plenty of advantages, but they had their inconveniences as well.

For example, the number of police officers was exceedingly low.

There was no big district police station or anything. The village just had one small station. Also, anyone there would not answer calls during the day due to listening to music with headphones and would be asleep once the sun set. The 30,000 yen bunches of grapes were enough to make any thief's eyes shine in delight, so the police situation was pathetic. As such, Intellectual Villages relied on hired armed security guards to keep the peace rather than the country's policemen. (Although those armed security guards did commit crimes themselves sometimes.)

Madoka was aware of that, so she said, "Then wouldn't it be safest to stay here in the Sanatorium? The inheritance agents have set up a trap in the mountain. Isn't that because they do not have enough force to take on the armed guards protecting the Sanatorium?"

I appreciated her suggestion.

I really did, but…

"If nothing was done about them, I might have ended up being targeted by the Yuki Onna's Package as well. The Sanatorium is filled with the wealthy. Everyone here has hired armed guards to protect them. If all of those guards were gathered, the inheritance agents wouldn't be able to touch you."

"Yeah…but I doubt that will happen." I tilted my head to the side as I thought. "Your group might help, Madoka, but I doubt the armed guards hired by the others would go along with it. Letting me stay here would bring the risk of a criminal group attacking with hunting rifles, so they'd probably just throw me out of the Sanatorium."

It was their job to protect their client, so they would not hesitate there.

Also, there was a difference between the number of guards hired by Madoka and the sum total of guards hired by all the others. If they came into conflict, the others would win. It was possible my only options would end up being leaving the Sanatorium on my own or having all the guards gang up on me and throw me out.

"Then what if I send a few of my guards with you?"

"Would those salarymen really go along with something outside their contract like that? And even if they agreed, they would be up against 10-20 people. If all of those are armed with hunting rifles, things would not look good for us. *Even if I managed to get down the mountain thanks to them*, I would rather not have it be at the cost of a few people sinking into pools of blood."

This was not just an issue of simple justice or morality.

Once a colleague had died thanks to their client's ridiculous request, even Madoka's guards might gang up on me. They were not government officials or the allies of the country's citizens. If they were thrown into an unreasonable situation, it was possible they would resort to unreasonable means.

"Then what are you going to do? When you were attacked before, you only just barely managed to escape."

"…Yes. I'm just a loser in the end. I was thrashing about in a panicked flight from a single man armed with a hunting rifle. This is hopeless. This isn't some light novel. I can't wait for an opportunity and counterattack. It just won't work. Merely surviving would be worth a Guinness World Record."

"Don't get that distant look in your eyes. You're going to be attacked by 10-20 of them at once this time, right? That isn't a situation where you can just run through the trees and escape."

I could not stay in the Sanatorium.

If I headed out into the mountain, I would be attacked by a group of 10-20 con artists armed with hunting rifles.

I had to get safely down off the mountain somehow, but this was as hopeless as playing a game of soccer against a team of 11 on your own. I would just end up being surrounded. This was not a situation I could get out of with a clever plan or technique.

And even if I made it safely off the mountain, could I return to a safe summer break?

I know I keep saying this, but they were armed with hunting rifles.

I did not want to spend the rest of my life hiding in fear of attack and it was entirely possible they would find out where I lived and attack my home. It was clear as day what my fate would be if they charged into my house in their outdoor shoes and carrying those dangerous weapons.

I wanted to survive.

I wanted to get back to my safe everyday life.

To do that, I would need to do more than get off the mountain without the inheritance agents finding me.

“…I guess I need to see this through to the end.”

“Shinobu-kun?”

“Madoka, you said you could ask favors of the workers here but not the other residents, right?”

“Y-yes. We’re all on the same level. This is like a hotel, so there is no sense of a ‘neighborhood’. No one will even answer a knock on the door.”

“That’s fine.” I took the binder that held the simplified resident agreement from Madoka. “Could you ask a favor of the workers? I can’t pay them, but *ask them if I can stay in the empty room this binder was in.*”

“That could be difficult.”

“Tell them a group of thieves will attack with hunting rifles if they don’t let me.”

“I’ll do my best,” said Madoka. “But a completely empty room might be too much. It would be a bit easier to get them to allow another person to stay in my room.”

“No, your room won’t cut it. To break out of this situation, I need to dive straight into the maelstrom.”

“What?”

“Also, with the investing you do, you must have various business related tools, right? Surely you don’t do it all on the computer. I’d like to borrow one of those analog tools.”

“What specifically?”

“A seal.”

It was not late at night.

Nor had all of nature in the area died out.

The summer was chokingly hot. The trees and underbrush gave off a thick green smell. The sunbeams leaking through the gaps in the trees covering the sky were bright enough to be called healthy. The high-pitched sound of cicadas was loud enough to drown out the rustling of the wind through the branches.

The scene was perfect for a memory from a child's picture diary.

This was the rural image that Intellectual Villages used as an attraction.

However, the situation I was in changed that world into a cruel one. That may have been how the world looked to someone heading to a cliff in order to commit suicide. I did not have the calm to spare to be moved by the scenery spreading out before me. I could only view the visuals as visual information.

I tried to concentrate and I tried to pay close attention.

However, I ended up taking in even less information than usual.

Each step I took was heavy.

I felt the invisible object known as my soul being worn down.

Even if I had had an accurate map, I would probably have gotten lost in that state of mind. And I would have no idea if the map I had was accurate or not. Should I follow that sense of danger within me? Should I ignore it because it would send me to my own destruction? Would I overlook some danger because I was too afraid of heading to my own destruction? The options circled around in my mind in an infinite loop. Before I knew it, that loop left me uncertain about any criteria on which to base a decision. It was like I had been turned into a robotic human that could not take any complex actions.

I had no idea what I was thinking.

I could not sort out my thoughts.

I could not tell if my thoughts were coming from my true feelings or if they were due to me being led astray by fear.

Ten to twenty men armed with hunting rifles lay hidden within the mountain.

Running across even one of them would put my life in danger. Fighting back against them was a dream within a dream. Even if I immediately turned around and ran, my odds of survival were probably less than 10%. In fact, I would likely just get shot while I froze up in indecision over whether to fight or run.

And even if I did survive, the inheritance agent would contact the others and have me surrounded in no time at all. If that happened, there was no saving me. Even if the mountain was a large area, there were only so many areas and routes people could easily pass through. With 10-20 people, they could cover all of those routes with some left over.

When would they come?

Where would they come from?

Even if I had had no other choice, I intensely regretted leaving the Sanatorium. I didn't care anymore. I was fine with having those armed guards gang up on me. I just wanted to take refuge in a safe building.

Just when I was about to turn back the way I had come, the hunting rifle attack began.

A great scream rang out, destroying the peace of nature.

At that time, an inheritance agent named Hanazono felt a tremendous pressure in his stomach. He was hiding in a thicket, standing guard along the zigzagging mountain road. He held a double-barrel hunting rifle in his hands. The heat of midsummer had soaked the inside of his suit with sweat and his face looked like it had been sprayed with water. His own heavy breathing rang loud in his ears. Each and every leaf of the thicket touching his cheeks tore at his concentration. He was filled with so much fear and regret that he felt faint.

He could see the high school boy that was his target.

He pressed the hunting rifle's stock against his shoulder to stop it from shaking. However, his entire body was shaking.

He was not afraid of the boy.

He was afraid of having to shoot another human being.

The inheritance agents had all gathered in order to make easy money.

However, the next thing they had known, this was the situation they were stuck in.

Murder was going too far astray.

They had clearly gone beyond the risk they had been willing to take. Whenever he had seen stories about robbers who had ended up killing their target on the news, he had wondered why those people did not use their heads. He would never have taken part in this criminal plan if he had known it would end with someone dead. He should have stuck with fraud he could pull off over the phone.

He felt like a sugoroku piece moving forward against his own will.

However, he would lose everything if he did not shoot.

Hanazono assumed their leader, Shironaka, had prepared the hunting rifles to ensure they would act. With a knife or a metal bat, they would have hesitated. The fact that they just had to move their index finger helped to distance their minds from the fact that they were stabbing through or smashing human flesh.

If that kid had not interfered they could have ended everything so well.

It might have been going too far to take his life.

However, they could hardly just let him go and enjoy his life.

Just one finger.

He just had to move his index finger.

That kid had done something worth that much.

The bullet would hit on its own. What happened after he pulled the trigger was none of his business.

If the kid died, it was his own fault.

Hanazono took one deep breath.

He brought his index finger to the hunting rifle's trigger and stared through the sight like he had seen in movies.

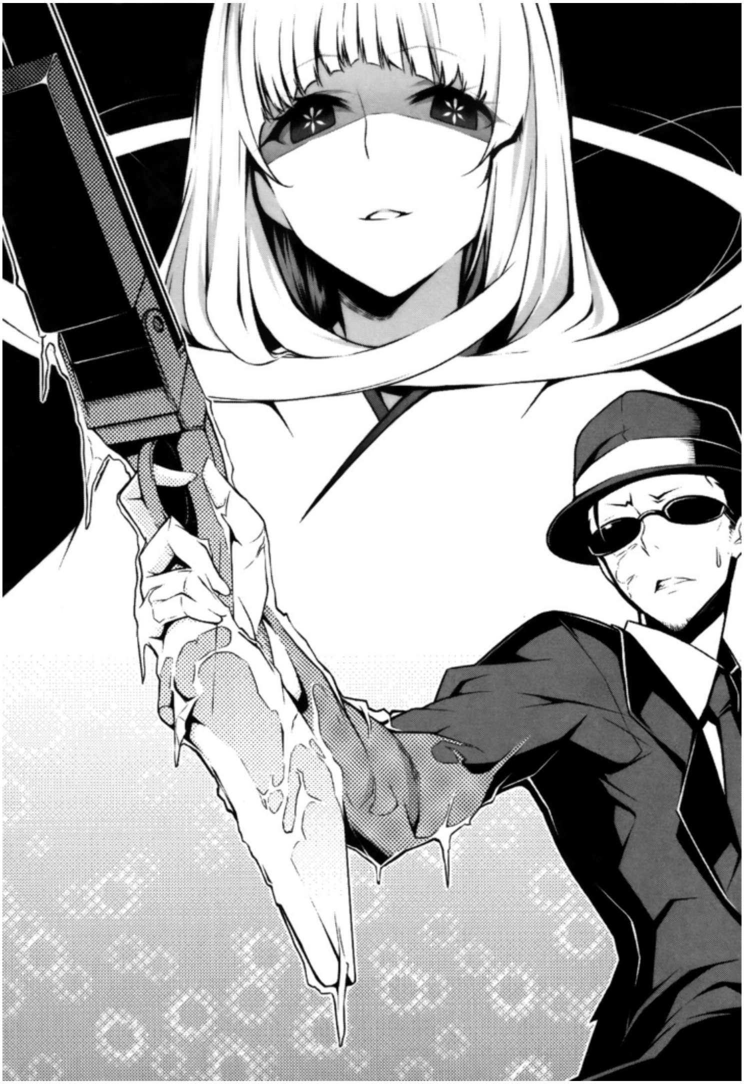
He just needed some momentum.

He could ride that momentum and squeeze his index finger.

However, a gunshot did not ring out.

The stock did not strike his shoulder from the shock of firing and a lead bullet was not fired.

"?"



Had his finger not moved? Had his muscles frozen in place out of anxiety?

With those questions in mind, Hanazono looked away from the sight and at his index finger. He saw something truly strange there.

His index finger had changed to a much darker color.

The portion of the finger from the 2nd joint on crumbled like dried paper clay and fell to the ground.

“Gyah.”

Someone who had experienced misfortune while mountain climbing in the winter might have witnessed something similar.

It was severe frostbite.

“Gyah gyah gyah gyah!? Gyah gyah gyah gyah gyah gyah gyah!!”

However, Hanazono’s life was not filled with such diverse experiences.

As if his senses had finally caught up with the strange phenomenon, he swung his right arm around in intense pain. Repeated sounds of something dry cracking could be heard. Half his palm and three of his fingers came clean off and flew through the air.

(What!?)

(What is going on!?)

He heard the rustling sound of something moving in a thicket. Was one of his comrades hidden nearby targeting the high school boy in his place? Or had they come to save him? That was what Hanazono thought, but he was wrong. When the familiar face of Murokawa emerged, he was writhing in intense pain and terror. The left half of his face had changed color. It had become a reddish-purple and one of his ears was missing.

Finally, a gunshot rang out.

However, it was not aimed at the high school boy. It had been an accidental discharge. Someone had accidentally fired their rifle. Hayashida came out from within a thicket and onto the road. His right arm broke into multiple pieces and joined the ruined scrap metal on the road. Had it been the explosive force of the bullet being fired? Or had it been purely the effects of the frostbite? It was unclear which had caused him to lose his arm.

It was not just Hanazono.

The same thing was happening across the mountain.

Hanazono had fallen into a state of complete panic, but he finally noticed that the high school boy was holding a single binder.

Hanazono had seen an old police drama where a thick manga magazine had been used in place of a bulletproof vest, but it was clear the boy had not brought the binder for that purpose.

The inheritance agents recognized the binder.

It contained the altered version of the resident agreement put in the target's room in their Package fraud that used the characteristics and conditions of the Yuki Onna.

"If you're trying to manipulate a Youkai, you probably shouldn't leave the core of your control out where anyone can get at it."

The boy opened it.

He opened it to the page that should have held their rearranged conditions.

However, there were a few extra lines written in sloppy handwriting that Hanazono and the others did not recognize.

–Party C will ensure the safety of Jinnai Shinobu. In order to carry out the previous clause, Party C is obligated to use all of her power.

–Party C may attack preemptively while making use of her power. Upon confirming anyone or anything intending to attack in such a way that will have a negative effect on Jinnai Shinobu's safety, Party C shall eliminate them. No consent is required to carry out enforcement of this clause.

And next to each piece of added text was a small red mark giving color to the otherwise black and white page of text.

A seal had been stamped in red ink.

To be more specific, it was a correction seal.

That mark was used to indicate that changes to a contract were made with the acknowledgment of the one agreeing to the contract.

“Gah…”

They had been taken out because they tried to shoot.

Everyone who had tried to shoot had been taken out.

The additional clauses were almost too easy to understand. And their meaning was simply overwhelming. Even if they had gathered dozens or even hundreds of people, their entire force would have been neutralized just by targeting that high school boy.

(He took control of the Package we assembled!?)

And then winter arrived.

The Youkai that symbolized the severity of nature and the rejection of the intense cold appeared amid the green of nature.

The gates of hell opened.

The high school boy tapped his own shoulder with the spine of the binder and spoke out to the men in the area.

“This is the deadly being you prepared. I’m sure you’re well aware just how dangerous she is. I’d rather not have anyone hurt more than necessary.”

“What are you doing, you idiots! Hanazono, Hayashida!! This is what we prepared the safety for!!” The voice of their leader, Shironaka, came from the cell phone Hanazono had dropped. “The cicadas!! I’ll bring out the insect cage! If we can get that monster out of here, we can silence that kid!!”

Shironaka charged out from a thicket.

In one hand, he held the type of small insect cage children used. Normally, using that as a weapon would seem like nothing more than a bad joke. However, in the situation Hanazono and the others had assembled, it was a protective charm with almost absolute effects.

And yet…

“Gh?”

It froze over.

The insect cage frosted over in white and cracked. Next, the cicadas inside and Shironaka’s hand holding the insect cage were wrapped in the frost.

Severe frostbite changed the color of his skin, the consistency of his flesh slowly twisted, and then the location of his fingernails clearly moved out of place.

The intense pain made Shironaka try to clench his fingers, but his fingers broke off in the next instant.

“Byah byah!? Th-they came off!! What!? They came off! They’re gone!?”

Shironaka seemed more frightened of the absurdity of that situation that should never have happened than bothered by the pain. The high school boy then opened the binder to another page.

On that page, it read:

~~*–Party C dislikes the summer, so she hates cicadas which are a symbol of the aforementioned season.*~~

It had been removed.

The sole safety Hanazono and the others had prepared was gone.

Now they had no way to stop the Yuki Onna.

No one could stop her!!

“Of course I changed what you had put in there. If I had used the alterations you had made as is, I would have had all my assets taken. Before reassembling it how I wanted it, I made sure to get rid of the clauses I didn’t need. Why wouldn’t I?”

The high school boy closed the binder, tapped it against his shoulder again, and smiled.

“Now then. Will she have to deal with all of you, or will you give up on your own? I’ll leave that decision to you.”

Part 13

The Zashiki Warashi frowned.

“Oh? The point of view of that flashback scene changed partway through. Was that some kind of bug?”

“It’s not a bug. After those attempted murderers put their hands in the air and surrendered, I gathered some information from them.”

“Well, it sounds like that was all wrapped up nicely. It seems to me that there isn’t anything left you need to discuss with me.”

“There is, you idiot. In fact, the most dangerous thing of all is still out there. The Yuki Onna.”

“Is that simplified resident agreement still in effect? So are you going to live the rest of your life with that Yuki Onna auto-guard on?”

“I made sure to add a part saying the effects of the altered clauses go out of effect in three hours after the change, so that’s not a problem. But the thing is…” I scratched at my head. “It seems that Yuki Onna sees me as a target by default without needing that resident agreement’s conditions. That’s why she asked me to marry her at the bus stop in an attempt to kill me. If I don’t deal with that quickly, I could end up trapped by all her questions.”

“It must be tough being a popular guy.”

“The Yuki Onna’s marriage promise is clearly just a means of killing the target more quickly. And the double preparation shortens the process even further. Asking someone to marry her is like a magic spell to her.”

“Oh? So you’re saying Youkai can’t have human feelings of love?”

“Well, you aren’t human.”

At that point, my overall small granny knocked at the door. She had been checking to see if the burglar had stolen anything, but the size of the household made that take some time. I had a feeling she had stopped to make some ohagi at some point, but it still would have taken some time.

“Shinobu, about that burglar.”

“Did you find something missing?”

“No, the opposite. It’s very strange. We have something extra.”

“…Hah?”

“This.”

My granny handed me a single binder.

Yes.

It was the thick binder I thought I had sent back to the Sanatorium via bike courier.

“Oh, no…” I muttered.

That burglar.

He wasn’t a burglar at all!! Did some idiot from those inheritance agents manage to get away!? And now he came back in the very, very end with some pain in the ass revenge!!

The resident agreement in the binder had a dog-eared page.

A ball-point pen and a correction seal had been used to add a single clause.

–Party C shall return to the owner.

I heard a sound like a crack running through the building. It was the sound of something freezing. The local environment was changing with the coming of something horrible. A chill ran down my spine.

That was no metaphor or psychological state.

The physical temperature in the room dropped.

“…married…”

I heard a voice from behind me.

A frail girl’s voice.

“…Let’s get married…”

O-oh, shit. Oh, shit! Oh, shit!! Oh, shit!!! Oh, shit!!!!

This was a real Youkai that had easily defeated 20 men armed with hunting rifles. And the cicada weakness the inheritance agents had prepared was gone. There was no way I could defeat her now. If she sealed my escape with promise after promise both explicit and implicit, I would eventually screw up. I had no intention of becoming a character from an old story!

"Th-that's right! Zashiki Warashi-sama!! The time has finally come for you to display your power as a true Youkai that protects her house and household…wait, she's gone!! She's completely disappeared!!"

The good-for-nothing Youkai in the bright red yukata had vanished into thin air at some point.

I doubted my granny would be of any help, so I had to do something myself. Luckily, I had the binder that could interfere with the Yuki Onna's characteristics and conditions. I could use it.

–Party C shall return to the owner.

Should I draw two lines through it to erase it? No. The Yuki Onna is already here and she seemed to want to kill me from the beginning. Even if I get rid of the irregular conditions and bring her back to her original state, she'll just come and kill me like normal.

If I was going to do something, it had to be adding something.

If I added some text identifying "the owner" as the person who brought the binder to the Jinnai household, I could change the Yuki Onna's target. That would also eliminate the threat of having one of the inheritance agents get away, so it was two birds with one stone. I still had the correction seal I had borrowed from Madoka in my pocket. All I had to do was…!!

"A-a-a p-p-p-pen!! I need a pen! Where is one! Shit!!"

The temperature of the room dropped drastically. It wasn't quite as cold as a refrigerator, but it was close. I could see the leaves of the Zashiki Warashi's SF bonsai changing color where she had left it on the floor. I had no time. I frantically reached for the pen holder on my desk.

"Wah."

My fingertips struck the cylindrical pen holder.

The pen holder tilted to the side.

“Wah.”

And all the writing implements inside scattered across the tatami mats. Just when I was about to the grab the pen I needed, they rolled out of my reach.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!”

Part 14 (3rd person)

The Thirty Six Stratagems cannot compare to simply running away. Simply fleeing from problems you cannot handle was the key to a long life. And I had been telling him from the beginning that he would be out of luck if he was expecting me to have any kind of strange special powers.

Honestly, how is a mere Zashiki Warashi supposed to defeat something as deadly as that?

Does he think I'm the queen of the sitting room[2] world and I have some kind of ultimate hidden skill?

“Hey, Zashiki Warashi. Want some barley tea?”

On the porch that was over 20 meters long, an old man playing tsumeshogi invited me over. I took a cup filled with a cold drink. This old man loved board games like go and shogi, but he did not like it when they were recreated with computers. I honestly did not understand why. For tsumeshogi it was easier to have the AI take care of the opponent's moves and it saved you the time of setting up the pieces. It seemed this old man loved things to be the same as they were in the old days. He had a hard time of it when even Youkai were hoping for modern changes.

Well, I have no intention of finding fault with someone else's interests and tastes.

That goes for both humans and Youkai.

“She seemed to like him when they first met and then he freed her from that Package. It isn't too surprising that she would get serious about it.”

“What are you talking about?” asked the old man.

“Hee hee hee. Love is a risky thing.”

“?”

Notes

1. ↑ Min-min is the Japanese onomatopoeia for a cicada.
2. ↑ The Zashiki of Zashiki Warashi means “sitting room”.

Chapter 2: Regarding Uchimaku Hayabusa

Part 1

I'll be blunt.

I don't like rural areas that much. That is why I jumped at the chance to start living alone in the city while going to a college prep high school. It also has a lot to do with why I joined the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. Unfortunately, I'm only in a low ranking, dead end position. I went as far as to use the old branch family system to alter the family register despite being unmarried in order to escape the confines of Intellectual Villages. No matter how bad for your health it's supposed to be, I wanted to live in the city and die in the city.

The thing is…I hate Youkai.

I don't know how things were in ancient Edo, but Youkai don't appear among the asphalt and concrete of a city. The only exceptions are places that thoroughly prepare the scenery like Nara or Kyoto. That is why I had always longed to live in Tokyo.

But the funny thing is that Tokyo has rural areas too.

And when certain pain-in-the-ass incidents crop up, I have to head there.

"…So this is the third victim."

Zashou Island was a lone island close to the Ogasawara Islands but just far enough away to not be considered a part of the World Heritage Site. And that is exactly why a lot of businesses wanting to *use its abundant resources for business purposes* financed the creation of one of the country's leading Intellectual Villages even though the island technically fell inside the Tokyo metropolitan area.

At first glance, the blue sea looked like something out of a documentary, but a closer inspection showed something like buoys floating at fixed intervals. They used sunlight and buoyancy to generate enough power to constantly monitor the flow of the currents and the amount of oxygen and plankton in the seawater.

Apparently, fishermen these days moved their fingers smoothly across waterproofed and salt-proofed tablet computers when they fished.

I was standing on a small fishing pier that was (made to look) run down. On that pier that was held in place with concrete sat a metal drum you could just barely reach your arms around.

The outside of the drum was wet, so it had likely been floating in the ocean.

A police officer in a soaking wet navy blue uniform gave me a report in a bewildered tone. The officer had likely pulled the drum out of the sea with the help of a local fisherman.

“We tried to deal with this on our own at first, but this is the third in a week. To be honest, this has gotten to be more than we can manage. I know it is a bother, but we have been forced to leave this with your department.”

“Don’t worry about it. This is my job. But…this is a rather unpleasant corpse.”

“Is there such a thing as a pleasant corpse?”

“Well, no. But this one is off-the-charts levels of unpleasant. He wasn’t just killed. They didn’t end there. They gave it more thought. This gave the victim fear greater than that of a simple death and it gives the same sort of fear to anyone who sees it.”

I suppose I should thank them for saving me the trouble of laying a blue tarp over the body, I thought as I peered down into the drum.

Inside was a single adult man, dead.

He had likely died two or three days prior. Due to floating on the sea, he had no maggots or flies on him, so he was in a better state than a normal corpse would be after that long.

He certainly did not look like a decent Tokyo citizen though.

The thickness of his neck was much greater than normal and he had a very aggressive-looking face. Also, I could glimpse a tattoo through the collar of his shirt. Western tattoos had become pretty common, but this looked like the “real deal”.

The man’s arms and legs had been severed and blood covered the insides of the drum.

“The other two were the same,” said the uniformed police officer.

"The limbs seem to have been forcibly severed with a dull blade such as a machete. Also, wires were tied around near the point of amputation, seemingly to prevent as much blood loss as possible."

"So the cause of death was…?"

"You will need to ask the medical examiner for the details, but it does not seem it was due to blood loss. It was multiple organ failure due to dehydration. …In other words, it is highly likely he died of starvation."

Tch.

This was exactly the method used by the pirate mafia near Okinawa. I believe "exile"[1] is the term used. The victim had his arms and legs chopped off, was put inside a barrel or a drum, and then set afloat in the sea. The poor victims would either flip over and drown or be dried up after days of direct sunlight. Rumor said a third fate of being pecked to death by seagulls also existed, but there was no saving you either way.

"What a pain."

"I know."

I had no idea if this was really a job for Department 1. If the pirate mafia was really involved, it seemed more like something for the anti-organized crime department or the PSIA. You didn't often hear about people getting promoted by getting into turf wars, so it seemed I had gotten stuck with a horrible job once again.

"Just to make sure, he's Japanese, right? He isn't some foreigner who was involved with some pirates, is he?"

"He is most likely Japanese. His nationality may be hard to tell from his looks, but the implant in his front teeth seems to have been done in the Japanese style. And no matter how quickly the current might have been, he would have mummified if he had floated all the way from the open sea."

"And he seems to have a tattoo. Maybe a *large criminal organization* is involved."

"It could have been forcibly given to him before he died or even after he died."

“True. But a tattoo is basically a type of injury. The medical examiner will be able to tell.”

I may have sounded a bit cold and uncaring, but that was my stance on things, so it couldn’t be helped. To be honest, I had no interest in corpses themselves. When there was a murder, I of course wanted to catch the criminal, but that was only for the sake of the victim’s family and to prevent the next crime. In other words, my desire to work was for the sake of living humans.

That said…

This did seem to have the possibility of future crimes, so I did have some motivation. Some.

“Now then…”

There was one more annoyance I had to deal with.

I turned my gaze away from the gruesome drum and to the pier.

“Hey, mystery freak.”

“What?” said a girl in response.

However, the voice came from lower than you would normally expect. It came from about the height you would expect of someone wearing a swimsuit and lying on a beach chair placed on a pier.

Oh, that is no analogy.

A middle school girl with a mostly flat chest really was sunbathing in a yellow two-piece swimsuit.

“What are you doing here?”

“How rude. I was here before you were, detective. I’m simply trying to make the best of my summer break.”

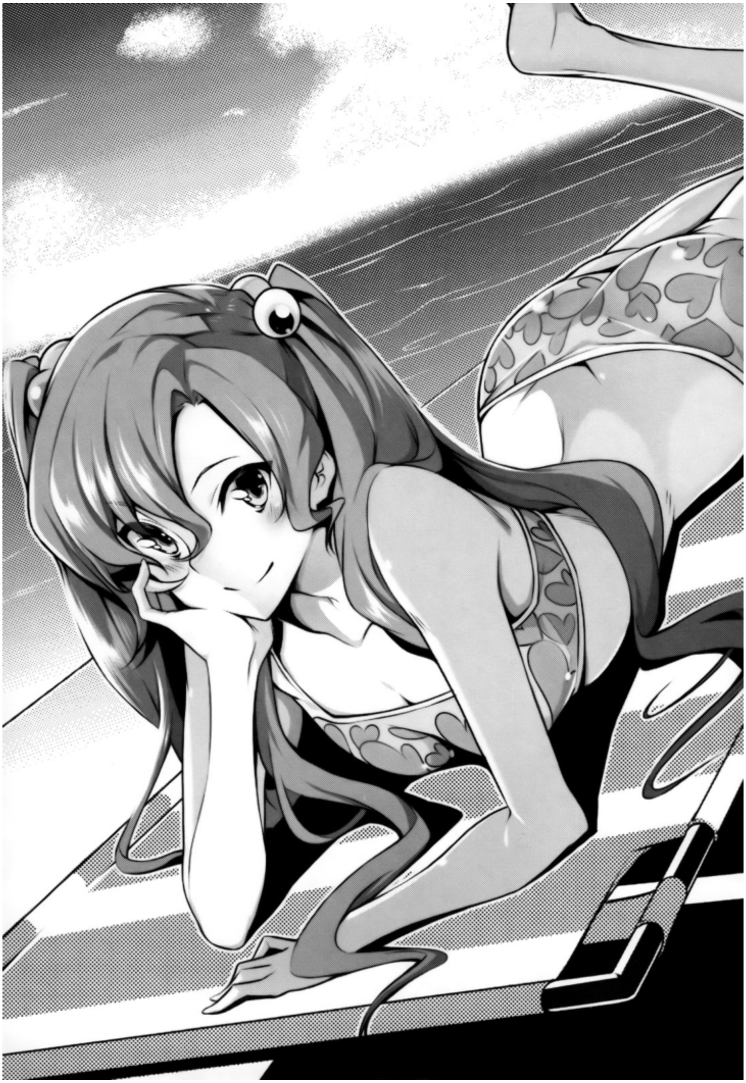
“That’s not what I mean!! Look! See this tape!? You’re inside it!! You’re supposed to keep out of here!!”

“Give that a rest and just let yourself be enchanted by my lovely body.”

“Quit writhing around creepily like a snake shedding its skin and get out of here. Move, move.”

I picked up the entire beach chair and carried the kid named Enbi outside of the yellow tape.

Why didn't someone else kick her out already?



"Oh, that's because of my bold presence."

"You may have the aura of a Dosojin, but you're just a middle school girl. Nothing more than a middle school girl."

Unlike me, she was interested in the corpses. Unless there was a murder, she had no interest in other people. As such, she had no discretion. However, this actually brought excess benefits along with it, so I suppose society was fairly well balanced.

It did seem she thoroughly hated the higher ranking police officers who were always focused on demarking their own turf, though.

After moving the beach chair away, I started to head back to the crime scene, but Enbi’s slender fingers grabbed at the collar of my suit.

She then whispered into my ear.

“…You don’t really think this was the work of the pirate mafia, do you?”

“What?”

“Once you’re done here, I’ll tell you.”

The way she set that up was incredibly noncommittal.

That mystery freak then pulled out a leather memo pad hooked to her swimsuit bottom. No, it was actually a smartphone with a cover that made it look like a leather memo pad. While still lying on the beach chair, she moved her index finger smoothly across the screen to operate it. She seemed to have completely lost interest in me.

She was happily sunbathing next to the corpse from a bizarre murder. That middle school girl had held complete control of her conversation with a police detective from Department 1. For some reason, she had a way of destroying the boundaries of how things normally worked like that. There was certainly something wrong with her mind, but I was a bit jealous of how she could do that. That said, I had no interest in walking down the same path as Enbi.

Mine may have been a completely dead end job, but I had enough of an attachment to it that I was not willing to completely abandon it.

I did not have the guts to quit and open a ramen shop or something.

Of course, it was possible that lack of guts was exactly how I had ended up in this dead end anyway.

I reentered the taped off area and the uniformed police officer asked me a question.

“What should we do now?”

“Good question.”

If the man had been both killed and stuffed into the drum on the island, we would only need to do a thorough search of the entire island. Unfortunately, he had floated here.

This was not the kind of crime scene where forensics could search for hair or fingerprints.

If the victim was from outside the island, turning over every stone on the island would not even turn up his identity.

Of course, the island would be investigated, but there was not much guarantee that anything would be found. Things you had to do but could not expect results from had a way of really eating away at your motivation.

This had been sent up to a larger investigation headquarters since it was a case of serial murders, but the detectives including myself, the forensics team, and the others who came only added up to about 20. This was because of how unlikely it was we would find anything on the island. The nearby islands also had to be investigated, the records of the ships that had passed by had to be checked, and the companies on the mainland related to the Intellectual Village known as Zashou Island had to be investigated. Since it was unknown where the actual crime took place, the area of investigation had to be spread wide. This had lowered the number of personnel working at each individual place.

“For now, we can go with the standard practice. Call in the islander who first discovered the drum and the one who helped you pull it out of the water so I can question them.”

“I can do that much. You’re a Department 1 detective from the mainland, so isn’t there anything a little…y’know…flashier you can do?”

The uniformed police officer made some kind of gesture on the word “flashier”, but I’m not quite sure what he was trying to get across. He was a surprisingly absurd person. It was possible he had gained a mistaken admiration for people in my position from watching too many police dramas. In reality, if a Department 1 detective went off on his own in a “flashy” way like on TV, he would only end up being shot by the killer he was trying to catch. The power of the police was the power of an organization. Going off on your own was the same as casting aside the power of that organization, so it was quite dangerous.

If you wanted that kind of thing, you would be better off going to that mystery freak.

Or perhaps Enbi's older sister.

At any rate, it was true there was one thing I had to do as a Department 1 detective.

"I guess I'll go get our rooms at the inn."

"Hah?"

"I need to make sure we have a place to stay tonight. We're a group, so that can be surprisingly difficult."

Part 2

The department chief yelled at me over the phone when I told him it would be 50,000 yen a night. When I argued that the price was quite reasonable for a high class Intellectual Village inn and asked if it would be good for the image of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department if we were sleeping out on the street, he gave approval amidst more angry shouting. It likely would not have been so easy had a director or official intervened.

It goes without saying that all the others cheered at my successful negotiation.

The value of tax money could become a bit unclear when it made its way to those who used it.

And then…

"…Why are you here, you damn mystery freak?"

"As I said before, I am trying to make the best of my summer break. I was here before you. Also, this inn is the only lodging facility on the island."

Tch.

The police could hardly reserve the entire inn, so there wasn't much I could do about it. I decided I needed to speak in hushed voices when discussing the case with my coworkers.

For the present, I desperately searched for something else to complain about.

"By the way, what's with that English gentleman-style pipe? You have guts to use that in front of a police officer, minor."

"Non, non. This is just mint, detective. A little bit of deduction should have told you that. The people of Intellectual Villages practically deify the branding of ecology and health, so I could very well end up being ganged up on and beaten if I was puffing on an actual pipe and disposing of the ashes just anywhere."

As she spoke, Enbi put the mint pipe in a long, narrow case and hooked it to the edge of her swimsuit. Her two-piece swimsuit had no pockets to store small objects, so she hooked things like her memo pad-style smartphone and her magnifying glass to her swimsuit bottom. (She did not have a wallet, but she likely used electronic money for everything.)

But with all that hanging there, the weight isn't going to pull her swimsuit down, is it?

“I have it calculated out to ensure no accidents like that happen. … But if you're hoping for one, I could always arrange one to happen.”

“Mh!? Cough cough!!”

Did she just read my mind!?

“Girls put a lot more effort into their looks than it looks. Should I tell you how much of a pain it is each and every day to maintain that impression of a ‘sweet-smelling girl’? I calculate everything out for my entire body.”

I did not like the direction that conversation was headed.

In an all-out attempt to change the topic, I focused in on Enbi's items.

“…Is there ever any situation where you actually need to use that magnifying glass?”

“It's more for setting the mood. It's something like having empty cans that look like smoke grenades during a survival game. They might not be of any use, but they put you in the right state of mind. Of course, once they make electron microscopes small enough to carry around, most cases will probably be solved that way.”

“As a mystery freak, I would have thought you would lament the advancement of scientific investigation techniques.”

“I just think of it as the shortest course to solving the case. If it can be solved easily, nothing could be better. We have no duty to go along with the criminal's gamble every single time.” Enbi's tone then changed to a light one as if she were inviting me out for a walk. “Well, whatever. I have something I want to speak with you about, so will you join me?”

“I'm on duty.”

“You left the questioning to the local police and are just waiting for the results. Also, this is the third death, so the speed of the initial investigation is of little importance.”

Don’t act like you know what you’re talking about.

Even if you’re right.

Somewhere out there was a murderer who had killed several people in such a gruesome way. That meant we had to work hard to stop the next murder. However, each additional corpse meant an additional plaything for Enbi, so she was getting excited.

I left the inn with Enbi and we entered a small bamboo thicket. As I walked along a promenade that crossed the terrain that swelled up like a hill, the middle school girl next to me pulled out her smartphone that had a memo pad cover.

“You always have to ask for my help, you cute detective, so what questions do you have for me today?”

“Sorry, but it doesn’t seem to be related this time.”

Unlike the incompetent police detectives from mystery novels, I did not come crying to her because I did not know the answer.

There were problems in this world that you were not allowed to solve even if you knew the answer.

“And it doesn’t look like the investigation will reach a dead end due to diplomatic reasons either. So I also don’t need your help in creating the setting of ‘the police investigation is stalled due to international pressure but a certain civilian happens to solve the crime on her own’.”

“Even though this is a complicated situation where someone is continuing to murder people while pretending to be the pirate mafia?”

“…Pretending to be?”

“After all, they have no reason to do this.” Enbi lightly waved her index finger. “What were the common characteristics of the victims? You won’t have enough information on the third victim who was just found, but the other two will do.”

“Adult males. In good health. Japanese. From the mainland and with no connection to this or any other island. They had their arms and legs severed before being stuffed into a drum and set afloat in the sea.”

“And one other thing.” cut in the mystery freak. She operated her smartphone to bring up some kind of data on the investigation. “The victims had brand name rice seeds stored in a clear plastic bag.”

“…Plant hunters.”

“A bunch of grapes from an Intellectual Village costs 30,000 yen. It isn’t unusual for people to try to sneak into the village to steal the brand name genetics.”

“So were the victims plant hunters who were trying to sell the seeds to the pirate mafia, but negotiations broke down so they were eliminated?”

“Um, hello? Don’t you think the pirate mafia would take the seeds for themselves before setting them afloat? If they took the time to stop the bleeding with wires after severing their arms and legs, I think they would at least check them for any possessions,” said Enbi. “Also, an Okinawan group would have no reason to want this brand name rice.”

“Why not? It’s from an Intellectual Village.”

“Mainland rice only tastes so good because it matches mainland cooking. The ingredients made in their land go best with their local cooking. Their primary customers are the Chinese but the Taiwanese Japanese food boom is fading, so I doubt it is something worth risking your life over. With fruits or other things you eat as is, things would be different. There are a lot of people that go to the effort of having those kinds of things shipped in by air to avoid using preservatives.”

“Are you saying we can eliminate the possibility of the pirate mafia being involved based on that alone?”

“I can’t make the police do anything, so feel free to waste all sorts of effort looking into that if you want.”

Damn, do I hate her.

“…If we do rule out the pirate mafia, are there any other possibilities left?”

“I can’t be absolutely sure, but I do have one guess.”

“?”

“The stage here is Zashou Island. Now, what is its primary industry? Yes, Uchimaku-kun.”

“Pearl and oyster cultivation. It’s a bit ironic that the cultivated ones are more valuable than the natural ones.”

“Technically, the term is mariculture. Instead of doing it in a completely isolated area, they leave the hatched fish in the ocean as they grow. A quite high-level smart system is used for this. Instead of just letting the fish grow and then taking them once they are grown, a large number of baby fish are used to interfere with the base of the food chain. That way, more of the rarer and expensive fish can be grown. The amount of certain fish and which there will be more or less of can all be predicted with a program.” Enbi operated her smartphone as she spoke, so she was likely looking this up as she spoke. “Mariculture is their primary industry and the inland areas grow things like dragon fruits and mangos. They use global warming to their advantage and make a killing off of tropical fruits.”

“And how does that tie into your guess?”

“Well,” said Enbi with a grin. “Where exactly did those plant hunters steal the brand name rice seeds they had?”

Part 3

On the way back from our walk in the bamboo thicket, we chanced across a bizarre phenomenon.

“Gh!?”

I suddenly felt a weight on my back.

The weight felt as great as 3 or 4 pickling stones.

As I groaned at the burden of that weight on my back, two slender arms wrapped around my neck from behind. The arms felt rather damp and moist.

Noooo!!

The Intellectual Village’s famous Youkai time has begun!!

“What is this!? A Konaki Jiji!? It feels a bit wet!”

“Hmm. From the looks of her, I’d say she’s a Nure Onna.”

“What kind of perverted name is that for a Youkai!?”[2]

“Eh? She’s a Youkai that drags any men she takes a liking to down to the bottom of the river. She isn’t the type with a child, so she might suck your blood.”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!?”

That certainly sounds deadly! So does that mean I’m in the middle of getting killed by a Youkai right now!?

This danger came completely out of nowhere.

This is why I hate rural areas!!

“Since she’s on your back, you probably can’t tell, but…”

“Wh-what?”

“She looks like a GAL of about 20. A GAL. That’s a pretty rare appearance for a Nure Onna. Detective, you’ll be a Youkai freak once you manage to consider yourself lucky in a situation like this due to the fact that she isn’t just a giant snake with a woman’s head!”

“I don’t want to be anything like that…!! It was because there were so many of these things around when I was growing up that I headed out to the city!!”

She hasn’t said a word!

I’d rather avoid having to deal with an overly familiar Zashiki Warashi, but this total silence is creepy!!

“Basically, you just need to not approach the river and make a dash across the land with your own strength, right?”

“So I have to waste all that energy and I get nothing in return? What did I do to deserve this!?”

“…Isn’t that basically the job description of a police officer?”

I knew there was no way I could make it back to the inn with that thing on my back.

I would definitely collapse partway there. And then I would be dragged back to the river.

Isn’t there anything I can do?

With that thought, I pulled out my cell phone. One advantage of Intellectual Villages was that their communications network was very thorough despite the area looking quite remote.

“Hello? Could you bring the car around!?”

“No fair!! You’re supposed to win out with your own strength!!”

Part 4

When the car arrived at the bamboo thicket, the Nure Onna suddenly let go of my back and left. Apparently, she was the type to quickly retreat when faced with a battle she could not win. As a police officer, a young woman lightly dressed in soaking wet clothes (and a closer examination showed those clothes had become transparent in various places) staggering off into the depths of a bamboo thicket was not something I could just overlook, but this was not a human. She was a Youkai, and a deadly one at that. Rather than protect her, I needed to keep away from her. Otherwise, my life could be in danger. Someone with a dead-end police detective job like me had a very minor role. Someone like that would soon find himself at eternal rest if he tried to act like a protagonist, so I had to be careful.

Our investigation produced no real results that day.

We worked until the sun set and returned to the inn once it did.

Even if we were investigators from Department 1 of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, we could not resolve a case in 60 minutes like in a police drama. Since it was likely more victims would turn up, we had to solve the case as quickly as possible, but the police were hardly all powerful.

“The wind sure is blowing,” said Wajima-san, a forensics investigator who had come to Zashou Island with us.

We were gathered in the reception hall for dinner, but Wajima-san must have had even less to do than a detective like me. After all, there was nothing for him to do without a crime scene or any pieces of evidence.

“They say a typhoon is coming this way. It’s one of the one’s they were talking about before. We were right to fly the body out by helicopter as soon as we could.”

“Ugh, really?”

The maximum wind speed in the storm zone was 30 m/s. Apparently, Zashou Island was in its direct path, so it was likely no ships, helicopters, or airplanes would be usable in the area.

"We can't leave the island for 2 weeks because of our job anyway. I'm sure the typhoon will be gone by then."

"It still gives me a bad feeling to know all forms of transportation will be down."

"Have you been watching those 2 hour suspense dramas?"

"I'm more worried about food and other goods we need."

I sighed.

Intellectual Villages were well maintained, so there would likely be no issue with the water pipes or the electricity.

"If it comes to it, we might have nothing but the Umbrella Jizo to rely on."

"That's not a Youkai story. And it seems the only Youkai around here are Nure Onna."

"I like the sound of that Youkai. And according to the local fishermen, Funa Yuurei come out at those times."

"Hehh. That does seem to fit an Intellectual Village focused on fishing."

"I grew up in the city, so this Youkai thing is still new to me."

"I'm jealous."

I had left my home town because I wanted to live somewhere like that, but it never seemed to work out. After chatting for a bit while eating our white rice, we switched over to talk of our work which was less fitting for a meal.

For example…

"This is just a thought I had, but this might not be a case of serial murders."

"You too, Wajima-san?"

"Three bodies have washed up in drums, but at different times. However, that does not mean they were set afloat in the ocean in that order. And since they were still alive at the time, we can't rely on the estimated time of death."

"You're saying they were set afloat all at once from a ship or another island and they merely washed up in this order?"

"Many different currents collide here, making this a complex area. But that raises another question."

"Yes, was it just those three who were set afloat?"

"It might have been more. We haven't heard of any washing up on any other islands, but they could have flipped over and sank into the ocean. It's also possible some are still floating out there. As I said, the currents here are complex."

"It also seems they are plant hunters."

"Yes. All three of them had brand name seeds."

"But…" I started, but the woman running the inn approached.

She offered us some sake, but I politely declined and asked for another bowl of white rice instead.

"Do you use special rice here?"

"No, we have a deal with Akita for that. They say local is best, but the subtropical environment of the island is not suitable for Japanese rice."

"Thank you," I said as I took the rice bowl and the woman walked off to another group. I then began speaking to Wajima-san in a low voice. "There you have it. The victims had this brand name rice, but where did they get it from and where were they taking it?"

"They don't make rice on the island, so it likely was not stolen on the island so they could take it elsewhere. So was it brought in from outside so it could be cultivated on the island?"

"But she said the environment here is not suitable for Japanese rice. Otherwise, they would have started making brand name rice on their own. No matter how excellent the seeds they had, there is no point if they cannot cultivate it."

"So it is unlikely they were taking it from here or bringing it in here. That means…"

"Yes."

Part 5

After eating, I left the reception hall and entered my room. There, I called the chief of Department 1. He would have still received the information through a director or manager even if I had not, but he seemed to like to receive information directly from those on the scene. We exchanged information, but it indeed seemed unlikely we would uncover anything useful in the first few days.

Nothing suspicious had been found on other islands or ships.

It was unclear where the drums had come from.

After my call to the section chief, I called my nephew Shinobu. This of course had nothing to do with my job. I wanted to ask about the typhoon. It was just one of a few different typhoons, but it was making quite the parade through the islands. They had likely already received the typhoon's baptism there.

"Cough, cough…Uncle? Did something happen?"

There was something odd about my nephew's voice. It was not simply poor reception.

"Do you have a cold?"

"W-well, this Yuki Onna I met recently has been a bit overzealous, so…wait, no!! I don't mind, so you don't have to work so hard at making an ice pillow! No, wait…you idiot!! I didn't mean you should crawl inside my futon to cool me down directly!!"

I heard sounds of a struggle on the other side of the phone.

"It seems Youkai are as fond of you as ever."

"Don't they tend to hate you, uncle?"

"I can't stand Youkai. The law doesn't apply to them. When they commit crimes through a Package, you can only arrest the human criminals behind it. There is no law with which to punish the Youkai. Even if someone dies, it's treated the same as someone getting killed by some falling rocks. There's no investigation or anything. Nothing could be worse for someone like me who works for the living more than the dead. If you think of it from a legal standpoint…"

"…Um, uncle. This Zashiki Warashi next to me is grinning and saying she used to avoid you because of the peculiar look in your eyes when you stared at the back of her neck as a teenager."

"Wahh!! Wahhh!!"

Damn that indoor Youkai! She's making things up again!! This is why I hated my home town so much!!

"It sounds like you have a bad cold, but if that's the biggest news you have, there must not be anything too bad. I take it the typhoon didn't blow the roof off the house or anything."

"This isn't the Three Little Pigs, so don't worry. Things in an Intellectual Village may look old and run down, but it's all artificial. Not to mention that I've heard this house has been quite durable for ages. It must be sturdy to have lasted hundreds of years. An apartment building made of reinforced concrete would probably have a harder time."

"True. Well, that's all I wanted to ask about."

Old Japanese houses were so sturdy because the roof and walls were made to be easily repaired. The entire roof could be redone in a single day. With reinforced concrete, you just had to let it deteriorate.

"You watch out too, uncle. I've heard you don't have to deal with Youkai once you leave these rural areas, but Youkai aren't the only dangerous things in this world."

"Yes, and I'm caught up in one of those things right now. But that comes with the job. It almost seems like dealing with a Nure Onna or Funa Yuurei would be more fun."

"Oh, those Youkai that sink ships? I've always lived inland, so I'm not too familiar with those. Can those things sink an entire tanker?"

"Common ways of thinking don't apply with them. If they can sink ships, they can sink any ship. It doesn't matter if it's a luxurious cruise liner or an aircraft carrier. But I'm sure you know how Youkai can twist the natural way of things more than I do. Say hi to your dad for me."

With that, I ended the call.

Humans were the frightening ones.

I knew very well what my nephew Shinobu was talking about.

The question was, where was this frightening human?

Part 6

I was awoken on the second day by the sound of pouring rain blowing against the window. The weather was so bad that the wind seemed strong enough to blow a small car away.

I honestly wanted to hole up in the inn for my own safety, but I was a police officer and a member of society. I could not take a day off from my job because of the weather.

I was in a dead end job!

I wanted to rise to inspector or some other position where I could shove any unwanted work on someone else.

However, the thought still left me feeling dejected since I knew inspector would be my limit however the system might work.

"…I should have dealt with more of this yesterday."

My complaining wasn't helping.

On my first day on the island, I had done nothing more than prepare the foundation for the investigation. Today, I had to start checking over the entire island and gather the information I needed from the residents.

The weather was bad enough that carrying an umbrella was hardly going to help, so I borrowed a raincoat from someone working at the inn and left. However, the raincoat left me feeling very hot and stuffy. It may have kept the rain out, but it left no way out for my sweat. I was sure my suit was soaking wet.

The other police detectives were likely headed to the village to question people there, but I decided to walk along the perimeter of the island as there was something I was curious about.

Zashou Island was a small island. A small mountain only 200 meters tall was located to the southeast and gently-sloping land spread out to the northwest. The village was located in that northwest area.

The primary natural plant on the island was bamboo. This created a clear contrast with the dragon fruit, mango, and such in the plantations. To be honest, it was kind of a creepy. The things here could be called “greenery”, but they could not be called “natural”. Human interests had blotted out the natural scenery. The island had surely once had its own unique “nature”, but that had been swallowed up by the stereotype of the “tropical island”.

“Hi there. What are you doing, detective? Stealing fruit?”

“What are you doing here, mystery freak?”

And why are you wearing a swimsuit in the middle of this storm?

“I don’t want to hear that from the person wearing a raincoat in this humid tropical weather. Is it some kind of diet?”

She read my mind again!?

“This wind would destroy an umbrella in 5 seconds and a raincoat is out of the question. So doesn’t heading out in a swimsuit seem the most efficient? It matches the environment.”

As always, she had her memo pad smartphone, magnifying glass, and such hanging from her swimsuit bottom.

…*Has she made sure her smartphone will be fine in this rain?*

“So why are you taking a walk down a mountain path in a swimsuit?”

“Since you didn’t just head straight to question the villagers, I assume my reason is the same as yours.”

“It’s a waste of time to just stand here. We can talk while we walk.”

“Good idea.”

We walked alongside a plantation filled with fruits covered in nets to prevent wind damage.

“Have you looked around the island yet?” she asked.

“Not yet.”

“There is a cave over at the mountain. I didn’t actually check inside it, though.”

“A wise decision.”

Someone from the city might imagine exploring a cave you run across, but people from rural areas would never do that. They were crawling with bugs like centipedes and spiders, and there was always a risk of collapse, a lack of oxygen, or volcanic gases. A limestone cave maintained for tourists was one thing, but exploring some small entrance you find was as dangerous as crawling into a pipe in a ditch that leads into the sewers.

“The only lodging facility here is the inn we’re staying at. The village has a simple sweets shop, a barber shop, and a few bars. There wasn’t much else you could spend money at.”

“That sounds like the stereotypical Intellectual Village. They purposefully make it look depopulated. It would be perfect for filming a nostalgic film.”

“But look.”

Enbi crouched down and picked up something half buried in the mud.

It was an empty cigarette carton.

“Then this makes no sense.”

“That alone isn’t enough to draw a conclusion from, but I suppose it is worth looking into.”

I sighed and then looked around.

It looked like I would have to walk all over the place in that blowing storm to find what I needed to strengthen my personal theory.

Part 7

Once noon had passed, I was finally able to take a break from investigating.

Wajima-san from forensics was glad to have something to do, but I could not just do nothing simply because I had passed the baton off. Now that I had the information I needed, I had no choice but to use it.

It was time to interview people.

Having to go around to each individual person in the torrential rain was hardly fun, but that was my job. It couldn't all be fun and games.

I was going to be asking dozens of people the exact same questions, but I thought it would be best to head to the most self-important person right off the bat.

I would do my best to keep it from happening, but the people I spoke to last would have the highest risk of telling a prepared story. It was best to head to the most suspicious people first.

"The president of the fishery cooperative would likely have something like that. Especially in a treasury of high-class goods like an Intellectual Village."

And so I first headed to the home of the president of the fishery cooperative.

His name was Kurokawa Kai.

Intellectual Village homes were sold on being "like the old days", but the fishing village homes were quite low key. The house had wooden walls and a tiled roof. Despite what my nephew may have said, it reminded me of one of the failed houses from the Three Little Pigs.

But the Intellectual Village influence could still be seen in the solar panels on the roof. Ecology had become quite fashionable of late, but that boom had caused an unneeded jump in the price of semiconductors, so it didn't really seem appropriate to be happily grinning like in the ads.

I had hoped to deal with it all in front of the house, but the typhoon was blowing rain up under the eaves. I was forced to set foot within the front door at Kurokawa-san's invitation.

"Oh, come on now. If I had something like that, I would be living in a much nicer house."

He looked like a pleasant man just entering old age.

He had a bit of a bent back, but he had an atmosphere that made me think he could easily carry around weights that would cause a detective like me to cry out in pain. To put it bluntly, he looked like he had painful fists.

I asked him arbitrary questions about what people were doing when the drums had been discovered and what he had been doing up until the police had been notified. Just as he realized I was merely asking the standard questions and began to relax, I suddenly stabbed into the heart of the issue.

"Kurokawa-san. I have heard the primary industry here is the cultivation of oysters and pearls."

"Yes, it is called mariculture. There is a line in quality we just cannot seem to cross when it comes to natural ones. If you want quality higher than that, it is much faster for people to interfere. Of course, an excellent natural environment is needed as a starting point."

"But it is not just that, is it?" I readily asked. "You are just barely outside the bounds of the Ogasawara Islands. However, what lives in the ocean here is not that much different from around those islands. In other words, the protected species in the World Heritage Site that are often targets of poaching can be freely fished here. …Is it more popular for people to buy them as rare pets than for food?"

Zashou Island had received investments from many corporations planning to use its natural resources which were on the level of a World Heritage Site. However, most of that was in the name of investigating the territories of the marine life and therefore was based on a catch and release policy. If non-locals needed to fish there, they could only do so in authorized areas that were strictly enforced. They could not simply fill their fishing boats as much as they wanted.

"Detective, is that what you have come here to discuss with me? If so, you are wasting your time. Even if such things are happening, it would only be the cowardly poaching groups. That is not a business the fishery cooperative has anything to do with."

His words came smoothly, but that was actually much scarier than otherwise.

People who suddenly had ridiculous suspicion cast on them by the police would normally be much more disturbed.

"Even if that is so, this island was originally a central point for such unsavory people."

"And does that have anything to do with us?"

"It does. Those drums containing corpses washed up here. And the corpses had brand name rice seeds on them."

"Zashou Island does not produce rice."

"True. It was not heading from here to somewhere else. Also, this area is unsuitable to cultivate it, so it was not being brought in from somewhere else."

"Then what are you trying to say?"

"This is a relay point."

Without hesitation, I continued speaking while well aware this method would apply the most pressure to the man. It was important to keep up the illusion that I had seen through everything.

"A relay point between point A and point B. And brand name rice would not be the only thing passing through. Most likely, a large variety of things pass through here. These would be products that would be dangerous to send directly. Perhaps *a large criminal organization* is involved. There was some trouble in the process of distribution and someone had to be 'punished'. I would say that is what is going on here."

"If that were true, shouldn't your main focus be outside of this island?"

"That depends on who these 'punishments' were directed at."

Perhaps I should not have said "most likely".

That may have created a hole in the illusion that I had seen through everything.

“If they were targeted at someone else and they just happened to wash up on this island, that is one thing. But if those drums were meant as a warning to the residents of this island, I can hardly say you are uninvolved.”

“I suppose I can see where you are coming from. That would make a good movie.”

“Stuffing living people in drums and setting them afloat in the sea obviously seems like a message, but so does the brand name rice seeds. That kind of hint would be found with a simple body search, so I doubt someone who went to the effort of severing the limbs and stopping the bleeding would overlook it. That simplifies matters. Those seeds were information intentionally left for someone to see.”

“And yet you are wrong,” said Kurokawa-san smoothly.

He seemed the type who would say things in meetings to serve his company even if it earned him the animosity of his colleagues.

“We have seen suspicious ships sailing in the seas around the island, but none have ever come to the island itself. At the very least, none have ever made contact with us.”

“Can you prove this?”

“You cannot prove they have, can you?”

“What if I told you I can?” When I said that with the same smoothness as Kurokawa-san, I saw his cheeks stiffen a bit. “There are cigarette cases littering the ground in places all across the island. Not to mention chuhai cans and brandy bottles. *And they are all brands not sold on this island.* And don’t try to say they washed up on the island. I found plenty of them in the middle of the island.”

“Ridiculous… That’s your proof? Detective, surely you know how Intellectual Villages work.” After a brief silence, Kurokawa-san was back on form. “The scenery is made to look intentionally run down to create the proper atmosphere. The vast majority of everyday items and luxury food items are bought using the communications network and internet shopping. The village is overflowing with products brought in from outside the island. That is not even enough for a false accusation.”

"Are you sure you want to use that as your explanation?"

"What?"

"I'll give you time to come up with a better counterargument if you wish, so I am simply asking if that is your final answer."

I did not want to get caught in some annoying intellectual argument, so I was going to hurry up and deliver the finishing blow regardless.

"Kurokawa-san. Mass produced products have subtle differences within the exact same product depending on the factory and time in which and at which they were produced. Stamp collectors will get excited over differences in the concentration of ink. By looking into that kind of thing, you can easily check to see whether these things were bought online."

"…"

"Also, records are left when you buy something online. Everyone has a purchase history. And this is not stored on your individual computers. It is stored on the company-side servers. Even if these are the same products by the same brands as people on this island bought, we can see if these are the exact same ones as you purchased. And we have started to check just that. So I ask again: is that your final answer?"

In an area where large numbers of foreigners came sightseeing all the time, this would be a hopeless plan. However, there was not that much data to go through for a solitary island with few people coming and going. And you mustn't underestimate the power the police had as an organization. A check of the purchase histories of everyone on the island for the past year would be finished in just a few days.

This was another reason why I hated Intellectual Villages.

Everything was nicely said to be "smart" or whatever, but you never knew what kind of information was being stolen behind the scenes.

"Detective, if you are investigating that, you must see our innocence as a distinct possibility. So let me ask you something: is this *your* final answer? If this all turns out to be a false accusation, I might very well cause an uproar over you falsely accusing people."

"True, I have no definitive proof. But I have my suspicions."

You may be trying to threaten me, but it is not going to work, Kurokawa-san.

Unfortunately for you, I come from an Intellectual Village too. I know how things work around here better than most from the city.

"More importantly, you focus on the environment and quality of your products more than all else. You would not just throw cigarettes on the ground, now would you? And it does not particularly matter if this would actually have an effect on your crops. After all, the brands from an Intellectual Village gain their strength from maintaining the proper atmosphere."

Kurokawa-san seemed unable to refute that point.

That was to be expected. Saying they did not care about pollution could directly affect his income.

"Kurokawa-san, my job is nothing more than to expose the truth of these murders. I have no interest in the dead. My only desire is to help the families of the deceased and to prevent another crime from occurring."

I then upped the pressure so he would slip up.

"And if I must dig down into some larger plot to do so, I will dig down to the very bottom. I am a professional. I may dig up something even more grotesque, but I am prepared for that."

I felt a small gust of air.

Kurokawa-san had let out a small sigh.

"Well, I am well aware that I have no authority to stop you," he said. "By the way, do you have any plans to leave soon?"

"You really should not threaten members of an agency that keeps the peace. And even if that is not your intention, we can still take action as long as we perceive it that way."

"Now, now. We are not that stupid. I am saying this in spite of the risks. I feel no need to get any more involved if there is no need." Kurokawa-san sounded more like he was reading a bedtime story to a child than he was threatening someone. "Detective, you seem to be mistaken about something. We do not have any issues with outsiders. If we did, we would never have built an inn on the island. After all, Intellectual Villages are constructed so they can fully function without any external support."

Outsiders.

Was he simply referring to me? Or was he referring to a *large criminal organization*?

The way he had changed the way he was speaking like a car changing gears seemed to be asking me to be careful how I answered.

"…Whatever the case may be, we can't exactly leave until the typhoon passes, right?"

"I suppose not."

Immediately after saying that, Kurokawa-san's expression clearly changed.

It was like a balloon deflating.

This was not hatred, disgust, or hostility.

His expression was one of pure regret.

"*I guess that's that then,*" he said.

"?"

I then asked the same questions to every influential person on the island and then everyone with some connection to those influential people.

They all reacted similarly.

I did not know what was hidden on Zashou Island, but the day was nearing when I would find out.

And once I had a handle on that invisible system, I would surely be able to see where the murders fit into it all.

To put it bluntly, I felt like I was winning.

I had found the route to solving the case and I thought I had everything under control.

I was naïve.

I still did not fully understand what an Intellectual Village was.

Part 8

Dinnertime had come and the storm had still not let up.

It might last for days.

And then a problem arose.

"…I can't get through."

I had tried to call my nephew Shinobu, but my cell phone was not getting much of a signal.

Is this because of the typhoon?

My colleagues were gathering in the reception hall, but I changed directions in search of somewhere I might get a better signal.

"What are you doing, detective?"

"Shut up, mystery freak. I can't get a signal for my cell phone."

"You too? What carrier do you use?"

"JBP. So you're having trouble, too?"

The mystery freak was using a foreign smartphone known as a Grape Phone, but it seemed she could not get a signal either.

It seemed to be a weather issue rather than an issue with the service provider. We tried for a bit longer, but could not get a call through.

Enbi tugged on my clothes and said, "This is perfect timing. Let's have a chat."

"I'd like to eat. Wait, where are we?"

"The first floor corridor. You got lost because you were walking around while staring at your cell phone."

"Oh, I made it that far?"

I don't remember heading down the stairs…

Just as I looked up at the ceiling with that thought, I heard the sound of a hunting rifle being fired from directly above.

I did not understand what was going on.

And the situation continued before my understanding could catch up.

The shots continued. Ten shots… Twenty shots… They just kept coming. It got to the point that my ears grew used to the loud explosive noises. I could hear thundering footsteps and screams mixed in, but the gunshots were loud enough to drown it all out. It was so much that I could not tell how many shots were fired or from what direction.

“This is bad…” said Enbi the mystery freak as she tugged on my clothes while I stood frozen in place. “It’s begun!! Those who didn’t want the police sniffing around have struck first!!”

“…You mean the police are being shot by criminals? But this is Japan.”

“Surely you’ve heard that in rural areas like Intellectual Villages no one is surprised to hear hunting rifles being fired.”

“But this isn’t getting rid of some lone sightseer who wandered here! We’re the police. This would wipe out 20 officers all at once!! Something like that would lead to a riot squad or even the JSDF being sent in. No one would be stupid enough to…!!”

I trailed off because I saw something very unpleasant.

A stain was appearing on the ceiling. This was not caused by a leaky roof. The stain was much too dark and red for that.

I had no idea what kind of construction had been used for that inn.

But how much liquid would there have to be to create a stain on the ceiling of the floor below?

Something was happening.

My fellow detectives and Wajima-san from forensics had been swallowed up by it.

“There’s some over here, too!!” someone shouted.

My heart skipped a beat.

We did not have time to check and see who had said that.

Enbi the mystery freak and I broke the window and jumped out.

We jumped out into the wet darkness of that stormy night.

We had finally caught a glimpse of the true face of the Intellectual Village known as Zashou Island.

Part 9

The island was only so big.

We obviously could not head to the village. The plantations and orchards may have looked natural at first glance, but they were actually protected by various cameras and sensors. The mountain apparently had caves, but those would likely end in our own destruction after falling into a natural trap.

As such, the process of elimination left us with only the option of fleeing into a naturally growing bamboo thicket that had zero commercial value.

To be honest, it did not feel safe in the slightest. We were simply buying time. If they searched the island, they would eventually find us and I could feel my body heat leaving me the longer I exposed my body to the torrential rain.

The mystery freak looked down at her smartphone, and then clicked her tongue. The signal must still have been blocked. I doubted it was just a coincidence given the timing.

“Detective, do you have a handgun?”

“I had no plans to leave the island for a while, so yes. I only have 5 bullets, though. If they have gathered all of the hunting rifles from around the island, we’re done for.”

“And they may have stolen the guns from the police they already attacked.”

She did not say “killed”, but that may have been out of consideration for me. However, I was not taking action for the sake of my colleagues. I doubted they were still among the living.

That may sound coldhearted, but I had something more pressing to ask.

“Why would they take such a desperate measure? Killing 20 police officers is essentially adding the period to the end of their lives.”

“Not necessarily.”

“?”

“It was in this bamboo thicket that you ran across that Nure Onna, right?”

“What about it?”

“There was talk of Funa Yuurei at the docks. Do you know what the connection between those two is?”

“…There isn’t one. One’s an ocean Youkai and the other’s a river Youkai.”

The mystery freak brought her hand to her forehead at my immediate response.

“A Funa Yuurei is a scary Youkai that sinks ships if a set process is not carried out. A Nure Onna is a Youkai that drags people into the river if they meet certain conditions.”

“So you’re saying they’re both deadly?”

“*They are both Youkai that make people go missing*.”

I gasped when she said that.

It can’t be…

“I was looking around Zashou Island based on suspicions that a *large criminal organization* is involved. In other words, I was assuming this was a testing ground for assembling a Package.”

“And that’s what the Nure Onna and Funa Yuurei are for?”

“No. The Funa Yuurei is probably the main one. Maybe they failed with the Nure Onna and switched over the Funa Yuurei or maybe they got the Funa Yuurei version working and then started trying a different variation. I don’t know.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Just look at the name ‘Zashou Island’.[3] This area originally had a lot of shipwrecks. At some point, an extra bit was mixed into the story. Rumors began to spread that some of those shipwrecks were faked in order to fake people’s deaths and let them get a fresh start on life.”

"I see," I groaned.

Normally, it took years before a missing person was legally considered dead. However, shipwrecks were an exception. Someone missing after an accident at sea was legally considered dead after only a few months.

That was convenient for people who wanted to be "dead" as soon as possible due to debts or some other reason.

"So Zashou Island runs a side business of counterfeiting documents to erase all traces of the identities of people who have messed up their lives beyond repair?"

If so, there was indeed a possibility that *a large criminal organization* was involved, but…

"…It goes beyond that."

"What?"

"I viewed this Intellectual Village too lightly. That is not the true identity of Zashou Island. I only half believed it, but that attack clinched it. Their Package is much simpler."

Then what is it?

Can it get any darker than that?

As I thought that, Enbi the mystery freak continued.

"The Package created on Zashou Island is most likely one that *simply erases people*."

I understood what she meant.

I felt a chill run down my spine, but Enbi continued just to make sure.

"It doesn't matter if the person is tossed into the sea or abandoned in the mountain. Their Package simply makes sure that the people are never found."

That was something that a *large criminal organization* would love to get its hands on.

It was a standard concept in movies and dramas, but even a police officer like myself had no idea if it was possible. But if there was some island where a body could be buried or sunk and never found again, it would be incredibly valuable for certain types of people.

“So the people of this island really do have a connection to *a large criminal organization*!?”

“It would be more accurate to say they may have *had* a connection.”

“Why put it in the past tense?”

“What proof do you have that led you to use the present tense?” The mystery freak looked up at my face amid the pouring rain. “I have seen hints of *a large criminal organization*’s involvement, but I have yet to figure out what specific organization it might be. The same goes for you, right, detective?”

“W-well, yes…”

“Then I have a thought. What if the *large criminal organization* was already eliminated in the same way your 20 odd colleagues were?”

“It couldn’t be…” I groaned.

I couldn’t believe it.

The scope was simply too great.

We with the police would not allow any kind of criminal activity, so why had we not smashed those types of groups? The reason was simple. Those *large criminal organizations* were simply too large for us to do anything about.

If we crushed one piece of it, that piece would simply be replaced, and they would get revenge for the piece that was crushed.

At first glance, they seemed to be a disorderly collection of violence, but they were actually strictly managed in ways calculated to work to their interests.

Even the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department would only get burned by them if it seriously tried to attack them. There was no way some amateur islanders could deal with that kind of professional violence.

“Do you know how many people make up that type of *large criminal* *organization*?" I asked.

"An independent group may have a few hundred people. The entire organization is probably in the tens of thousands. We don't actually know what size of group the islanders dealt with."

"But that's still at least a few hundred. A group that size could overpower the people on the island with numbers alone!"

"If they all came at once. What if, instead, a ship of a dozen or so would come to the island and those people would be eliminated? Then when the first group did not return, the next group of a dozen or so would go…and then it all repeats. That changes things, doesn't it?"

I could not believe what the mystery freak was saying.

"The *large criminal organization* would not know why the first group never returned from the island. That is the power of the Package at work. They may have only viewed it as some personnel missing, so they had to send someone else in their place. It would not be difficult to wipe out people who are not even remotely suspicious." The girl spoke while wrapping her arms around her own body that was soaking wet from the rain. "The core of this incident is not the *large criminal organization*; it is Zashou Island itself."

"But at what stage? They eliminate people, catch tropical fish, and act as a relay point for plant hunters with brand name rice. They only get anything from that by having the *large criminal organization* involved, right? Zashou Island cannot complete the business on their own."

"That is why I was primarily investigating the *large criminal organization* and let my guard down about the residents of Zashou Island. But I think you are wrong about this, detective. Those types of crimes that lead to obvious profit likely began after the *large criminal organization* came to Zashou Island. However, Zashou Island likely went bad much, much earlier than that."

"?"

"If the people of Zashou Island do have a Package that can completely erase any traces of a murder, they would have no reason to wait until now," said the mystery freak quietly. The pouring rain made it difficult to hear her, but that just made it all the more creepy. "They could have just done it the instant the police arrived on the island. Nothing was stopping them from simply waiting at the dock with hunting rifles in hand. And yet they waited for today. They did not come to silence you in fear of your investigation. *I think it was some other trigger that set off the annihilation of the police here*."

"Some other trigger?"

"Something in this small society known as Zashou Island that rivals the law. Perhaps some custom or tradition that has continued on since before modern laws were created."

…

What?

Something bothered me about what the mystery freak had just said. I felt like I had come across some kind of hint that filled a hole in her reasoning.

But where?

Where?

"…It was Kurokawa," I realized.

"Their leader?"

"After I stopped by his house and asked him some questions, he asked me if I was planning to leave. When I said no, he muttered something about 'I guess that's that then'. Do you think that could have been the trigger?"

"He wanted you to leave?"

"Do you think there is some deeper meaning?"

"No, I think we can take this quite literally. He was basically saying things did not have to grow more serious if you had left then. But that just leads me back to the fact that they could simply have killed everyone the instant they stepped off of the boat. Maybe there is some meaning in remaining on the island for a certain amount of time."

"What do you mean? We still don't know exactly how they are related to this incident, but I doubt they wanted us looking around."

Even the vast majority of completely innocent people looked less than pleased when they saw a police badge when answering the door. No one wanted to be caught up in some kind of trouble. That was a completely normal reaction.

“Is that really so?” The mystery freak seemed to have a different idea. “I am not talking about these recent murders. I am talking about the entire history of Zashou Island that spans hundreds of years.”

“?”

“It has a small population. It has few resources. It is a small world cut off from the flow of time. …If the people of Zashou Island disliked feeling left behind by the rest of the world, what could they do to remedy that?”

“Well, they could let in the more advanced culture so that…”

…*Huh?*

Did I just say something important without realizing it?

“Exactly. In order to speed up the flow of culture on Zashou Island, it would be quickest to invite in people from outside. Just like how guns were introduced in Tanegashima. …And remember this island’s name? It seems clear they have had unfortunate guests washing in for ages.”

“So the residents of the island see you and me as targets carrying the things they want?”

“The same could be said for the *large criminal organization*,” added the mystery freak.

But…

“That reasoning only works if you assume the people of Zashou Island wanted to modernize rather than retain a more leisurely flow of time. It doesn’t work if they wanted to live a leisurely life cut off from the flow of the ages.”

“That clearly is not the case.”

“How can you be sure?”

“An Intellectual Village that felt that way would not let in anything from outside."

…I see.

Come to think of it, Kurokawa did say they wouldn't have an inn if they hated outsiders.

"Zashou Island would show hospitality to outsiders to acquire their technological information, but that would not tie up all the loose ends. Just as the gun destroyed the society of the sword, some kinds of new technology are sure to destroy the order of the island. They needed a countermeasure for that."

"And that is why Kurokawa wanted us to leave…?"

"It may not have been quite so dangerous a thing at first. They would only allow people a short stay and not let them participate in their government. As long as outsiders left, the order of the island could be preserved. But if someone stubbornly refused to leave and tried to gain a position of power on the island…"

"They would go as far as to kill them to get them on the boat home."

Disturbing the order of Zashou Island.

Staying too long and employing a power that could destroy the chain of command on the island.

I gritted my teeth because I could think of too many things that fit that.

It made sense.

And not just for the police, but for the *large criminal organization* as well.

If the people of Zashou Island really were acting on that reasoning, they would have seen both organizations as targets that they had to "force to leave".

"So would that make this something similar to Rokubu Goroshi…?"

But if we were going to act on this theory, there was one thing that bothered me.

"What about those drums?" I asked. "If the people of Zashou Island use a Package to make incidents and bodies disappear, would they really make such a fuss over those?”

“When the local police officer told you the incident had gotten too big to handle locally once a third drum was found, he was likely lying. He was likely one of the ones doing the killing on the island.”

The way she added that last sentence so casually made me feel a bit dizzy.

But it got worse.

“Those drums may have been an SOS sent out by the *large criminal organization* that got wrapped up in the attacks.”

“You mean they did that themselves?”

“It may be directly linked to a weakness in the Package or the scale of the incident may have grown so large it could no longer be completely hidden by the Package.”

By this point, simply saying I had decided to leave after all would not stop the people of Zashou Island from killing me.

I had already pulled the “trigger” the mystery freak had mentioned.

The people of Zashou Island had already killed hundreds of people, so 20 or so police officers were nothing to them. In fact, they might not even feel any guilt over shooting people with their hunting rifles. They may have come to kill us with the same feeling as preparing a futon for a guest who was spending the night.

They would not stop.

If we did nothing, we would end up being cornered.

“But this incident made it to the surface and we were called in,” I said. “That means the Funa Yuurei Package is not perfect. It has a hole somewhere.”

“Yes. But it is also possible you were not the first police officers to come to Zashou Island.”

It was possible that the police were doing the same thing as the *large criminal organization*. Groups of police may have come to the island a few times before and been slaughtered only for the entire process to repeat. I needed to find out as soon as possible what had happened at the police stations on the surrounding islands.

Some horrible images came to my mind, but running from reality would not solve the problem.

“If they don’t hear anything from us in three days, they will send a helicopter out.”

“But as long as the Funa Yuurei Package is functioning, you will have merely ‘disappeared’ and those outside the island will see no reason to fear. If anyone does happen to come here, they will be shot while they have their guard down.”

“Then we have to do something about that Package.”

I turned to face the largest problem.

Shit.

A police officer relied on the power of an organization, so you could not expect one to act like a protagonist.

However, I was the kind of person that worked for the sake of the living rather than the dead. And even if every single resident of the Intellectual Village known as Zashou Village was guilty, I still knew one living person I could save.

Enbi the mystery freak.

She was a horrible brat who had a way of preventing any kind of common knowledge from working in regards to her, but she was still a civilian and therefore someone I had to protect.

And to do that, I had no choice but to do something that was quite unlike me.

“If the Funa Yuurei Package is complete, there is likely no way we can win. However, if we can do something about that Package, we may be able to receive standard assistance from the outside and survive this.”

Part 10

A number of powerful lights danced about, cutting through the darkness as they went.

We were of course not the ones using flashlights. It was the islanders holding them. The mystery freak and I held our breath amid the pouring rain and waited for them to leave.

The bamboo thicket rustling above us was quite unnerving.

The inescapable darkness squeezed at my heart.

I was soaked down to my underwear and the feeling of the cold cloth sticking to my skin made it all the more uncomfortable.

They did not seem to have found us yet, but those powerful lights were intimidating enough regardless. If we entered that ring of light, we were dead. That clear truth relentlessly bound all of our physical abilities as human beings.

Nevertheless Enbi grabbed at my clothes and whispered.

“Let’s run away.”

“We can’t move now. They would notice.”

“They won’t see the movement in this darkness and the sound of the typhoon will drown out any rustling of underbrush. …If we end up in that light, we’re goners, so at least we need to move someway”

What we needed was not to put physical distance between ourselves and our pursuers.

As long as the light did not catch us, we would survive even if we were back to back with the pursuers. That was the kind of safety we needed. The bamboo thicket sloped up toward the mountain, but the ground had smaller hills, too. We hid behind a small protrusion of ground.

I did not particularly care how, but I wanted some time to think.

The island was less than 10 kilometers across and there were…400

or 500 islanders. I had no idea how many of those were actually out searching, but they would eventually find us if they continued a thorough search.

We had to come up with a plan before that happened.

We needed some method of escaping Zashou Island.

“Luckily, this isn’t Hawaii or Guam. If we can borrow a small fishing boat…well, we might not be able to make it to the mainland, but we should be able to reach a larger island with an airport.”

“Even though this really looks like a Funa Yuurei Package? Seems to me that would be charging right into the enemy’s turf.”

“Funa Yuurei, hm?”

My specialty was crimes in which people were killed by other people. To be honest, I did not know that much about those who did not fall under the rule of the law. My nephew Shinobu probably knew more about Youkai.

What I knew with that amateur level of knowledge was…

“They’re Youkai that sink ships, right? Fishermen will get on a ship and head to sea. Then…wait, how do they appear?”

“That is actually rather vague. The standard theory is that small hands appear on the ocean surface at some point, but there are few writings explaining exactly ‘where’ they come from.”

“It sounds like they can target you no matter where on the ocean you are.”

Youkai, especially the deadly ones, had a tendency to be ridiculously overpowered.

“So what is it that makes them kill you? If I recall, you give them a water ladle and they sink the ship.”

“That’s skipping a step. The water ladle is like a protective charm. You will be killed because the Funa Yuurei have come to your ship, so you give them the water ladle to avoid that.”

“So they sink the ship if you do nothing?”

"The actual method of killing is not well defined. Since the story has a bunch of hands on the ocean surface, it's possible those hands grab the ship and capsize it."

The bright light of a flashlight cut by above our heads.

I was so nervous I felt a pain in my chest, but we remained in the shadows because of the protrusion in the ground.

"So Funa Yuurei are a deadly Youkai that kill people without question upon meeting them? And even when you give them the 'protective charm' that is the sole way of avoiding it, they kill you if you do it wrong?"

"The right way is to give them a water ladle with no bottom," said Enbi. "It is impossible to defeat or obstruct a deadly Youkai using normal means. The most you can do is ensure their process of killing amounts to nothing so you can escape any danger."

But there was one thing I found odd.

The Package the people of Zashou Island had created was constructed to make any inconvenient corpses completely disappear.

Yes, completely.

"Throwing a body in the ocean does not completely eliminate all evidence of a crime. Even if the body is not found, it can still be deemed a murder. *If everything needed to objectively prove a murder took place is gathered,* a judgment can be made."

For example, a large blood stain could be found.

Or a metal drum could be found with evidence a human body had been completely burned within it.

A single piece of evidence was enough, so the Funa Yuurei was not enough for the Package.

After all…

"If they shoot us with hunting rifles here, at the very least, blood and pieces of flesh would be sent everywhere. There's no way they can clean it all up. I don't see how this method could cause a murder to 'disappear'."

“We are not dealing with an Edo period Youkai here.” The mystery freak gave a small sigh. “If the Funa Yuurei are being used for modern crime in a Package, I doubt they are no more than an existence that sinks ships with a water ladle. The symbols will have been broken down and rearranged into objects and conditions that suit the people of Zashou Island.”

“Come to think of it, my nephew Shinobu said he ran into a Yuki Onna whose conditions had been combined with some facility’s usage agreement.”

“My sister would know more about that kind of thing than me.”

“…I’d say she’s practically a Youkai herself.”

Don’t bring up a woman of whom the PSIA are too afraid to keep tabs on. Thinking about power that you don’t currently have is a sign that you’ve stopped thinking of an actual solution.

“So the modern arrangement of the Funa Yuurei involves those insane islanders who each have a hunting rifle.”

As I spoke, I pulled out my handgun.

It was a small model provided by the police. It was meant more as a threat than an actual means of injuring or killing others. The cylinder held 6 shots, but I only had 5 loaded.

Even so, it was the last weapon I had available.

Whether I was actually going to fire it or not, the mere act of pulling it out wore on the nerves of a policeman in the kind of dead-end position I had.

“…At any rate, we can’t escape without stealing one of their fishing boats.”

“The fishing harbor is basically the headquarters for the people of Zashou Island, right? Also…”

“You want to know if we would be fine heading out in a ship in the middle of this storm, right? To be honest, I doubt it. But it might be better than staying here on this insane island.”

Suddenly, I stopped talking.

This was because of the soft feeling I felt under my feet. Also, I caught a whiff of a sour, irritating odor that was a bit different from iron and stabbed at my nose.

I felt a powerful urge to not look down.

I felt like I had made some kind of misunderstanding.

It was a similar feeling to finding out what some food you ate truly was after praising it for being delicious.

“Wha-…”

The mystery freak started saying something, but stopped.

She was swallowed up.

That was how it felt to me. Enbi who was just a step away from me had been swallowed up by something. And in a few seconds, the same would happen to me. The one who had already been swallowed up and the one who was about to be swallowed up. That was the only difference between us.

And then I looked down.

I learned what it was I had stepped on.

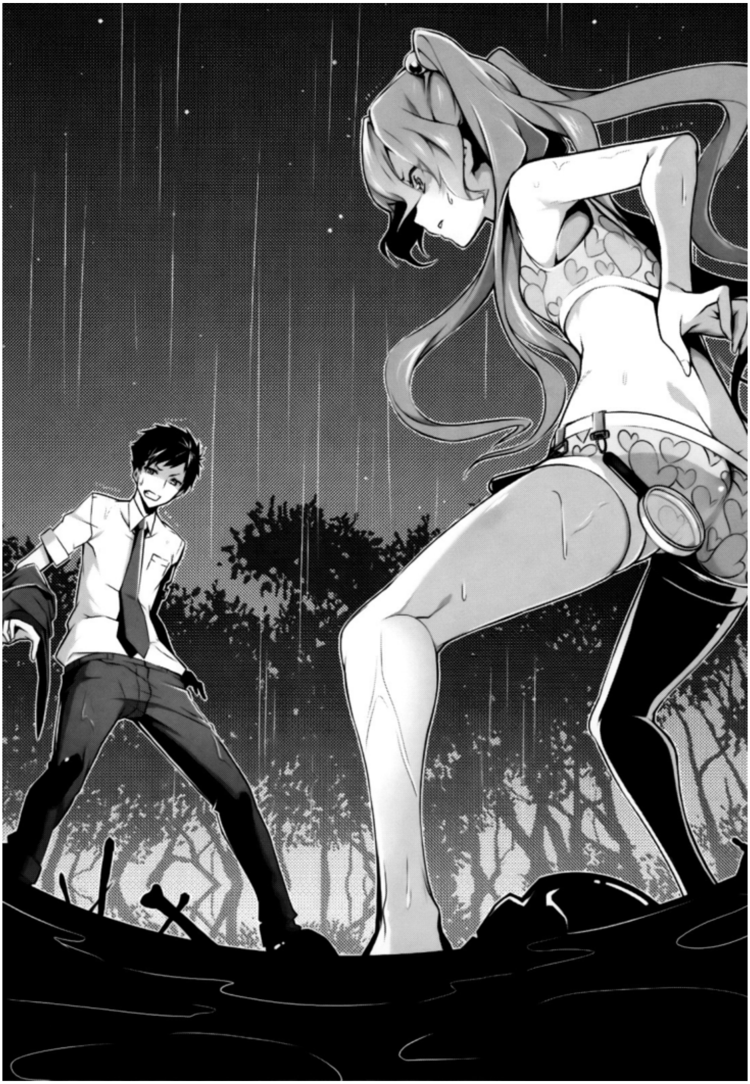
I had found them.

The corpses.

This was not something as cheap as a single corpse.

These human corpses were thoroughly decomposed, discolored, and had lost all semblance of their original shape.

They were all mixed together to the point that it was impossible to tell how many people it had originally been.



I ignored the overall situation I was in and let out a scream. I tried to scrape the sticky, mud-like substance off of my foot, but I soon realized that was impossible. I had nowhere else to stand. A feeling like stepping through the bottom of a soaking wet cardboard box was all it took to tell me that.

I was surrounded by corpses.

I could not believe that I had not seen them until then.

Or perhaps they had been rendered invisible.

Perhaps we could only see them now because we were now the ones to be killed.

“Funa Yuurei are said to sink the ship and kill everyone aboard, but that is actually rather vague as well,” said the mystery freak with a pale face. “To be more accurate, the people ‘go missing’ while ‘on the boat’. It is only because they are never found again that they are deemed drowned and dead.”

They had not hidden the bodies.

They had made them invisible.

While on the island.

While on Zashou Island.

No.

If what the mystery freak said was correct…

“This is…the boat?”

I was completely dumbfounded, but I frantically moved my lips. I knew I could not let myself stop thinking, but I could feel my thoughts being ripped from my head.

“Did they have Zashou Island itself correspond to the Funa Yuurei boat!?”

Youkai that made people disappear from the boat.

If Zashou Island corresponded to that boat, they could almost automatically cause any murder that took place on the island to disappear.

Yes.

That was it.

“The Funa Yuurei are a large number of hands. That’s exactly what the islanders pursuing us are! And Funa Yuurei kill using a water ladle. They don’t do it unarmed. Since they use a tool made by humans…”

“Not good…Their hunting rifles!!”

Some unpleasant symbols were fitting together too well.

The light from multiple flashlights headed our way.

The sound of footsteps on the undergrowth could be heard clearly even through the torrential rain.

I wanted to run, but my legs refused to move.

We were surrounded.

It was just like we were surrounded by countless hands while on a tiny fishing boat in the dark sea.

As long as we were on the “boat” that was Zashou Island, we could not escape those people who corresponded to the Funa Yuurei.

I immediately moved my hand to operate my handgun.

That was all I could do.

In the next instant, the deep gunshot of a hunting rifle rang out.

Part 11 (3rd person)

The gunshot was accompanied by powerful recoil to the shoulder.

When the hunting rifle shot struck the detective in the thigh, he fell to the wet ground as if his feet had been swept out from under him. The man cried out as he collapsed on top of the rotting corpses that had turned green and gray.

Kurokawa, the president of the fishery cooperative and the man who led the islanders from the Intellectual Village of Zashou Island, had not shown mercy. He had seen that the detective was messing with his handgun, so he had immediately pulled the trigger. Instead of aiming for the man's vitals, he had just tried to hit him wherever he could.

This had had the desired effect. The detective had dropped his handgun. The shot shell was meant for birds, so it had not torn his limb off even from that close range.

A group of about 15 gathered in the bamboo thicket with Kurokawa at their center.

"Contact Tasaki and Inoue's groups. We don't need to scatter ourselves any further."

On Kurokawa's instructions, two younger men spoke into their radios.

Kurokawa and the others had switched off the normal network for cell phones and the like.

Kurokawa heard someone's breath whistling.

It was coming from the detective who had been shot.

The girl next to him was unharmed, but she seemed to have fallen into a state of shock at the fact that the detective had been shot. Also, if she charged at them, she would merely be forced back with the hunting rifles.

One of the young men speaking with their fellow islanders over the radio asked Kurokawa a question.

"What do we do now?"

"Just to be safe, we need to make sure there are no others left. Well, even if there are, I doubt they can leave the island. Still, we need to know exactly how many people we need to have leave." Kurokawa looked around. "We only need one of them to ask about the situation. We need to get detailed information out of them, and this one already seems too weak for that. We will head back with just the one we need."

Who was it that would be saved?

Who would be shot to death by dozens of bullets while surrounded by rotting corpses?

Who would be dragged off to some strange place and have their body torn apart while still alive until they satisfied the islanders with their answers?

"…"

While still collapsed on the ground, the detective's right arm moved.

Kurokawa pulled the trigger without hesitation.

The shot stabbed into the area between the man's wrist and elbow. Blood sprayed into the air.

"Gyaaaahhhhh!! Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Even as he screamed and writhed in pain, the detective continued crawling through the rotting flesh and toward his handgun. Kurokawa frowned. Normally, people would raise their hands in surrender at that point. Even with certain death approaching, human beings would give in as long as you gave them enough clear pain.

There was something more there.

The man's movements were dull. With his leg shot, he could no longer run away from the hunting rifle's barrel. Kurokawa could take his time and aim for the man's head or chest.

The detective's hand reached the handgun.

However, Kurokawa already had his hunting rifle aimed, so he was able to take action faster than the detective who was crawling along the ground and had only just grabbed his gun.

Kurokawa could kill him.

Just as he brought his finger to the trigger, something strange happened.

The detective did not try to shoot the handgun. He weakly tossed the mass of steel at Kurokawa.

At the same moment, Kurokawa wordlessly fired his hunting rifle.

With a tremendous blast, the shot struck the detective in the face.

“…What was that?” Kurokawa muttered as he looked down at the detective who had rolled over from the blast and finally stopped moving.

He seemed to have been attempting something, but it had ended in failure.

At any rate, the detective was dead.

Just as Kurokawa was about to order his comrades to bring the girl back with them, he realized something.

Something was odd.

Something was strange.

Something was missing.

He looked down at the girl whose arm he was grabbing.

That was it.

“Why are you not screaming?” he asked. “You fell into shock when that detective was only shot in the leg. He was just shot in the face. That completely settles this. So why do you seem calmer now!?”

It was not that the shock had been so great that her emotions had disappeared altogether.

The girl looking up at him had clear calm in her expression.

It was so eerie that Kurokawa was overcome with unease.

The girl's pale lips opened to speak.

"Because he made it in time."

Kurokawa was not able to ask what she meant.

The detective who Kurokawa had supposedly shot to death stood up from amid the pile of rotting corpses.

For an instant, Kurokawa's emotions were overwhelmed by an extraordinary blankness. His mind could not keep up. It was not right for a man whose face had been utterly smashed to be getting up. And yet the detective's face no longer had a scratch on it. It was not a simple case of having missed. Kurokawa had clearly seen the shot he fired strike the detective in the face. And yet…

"…That was close," spat out the detective as he grimaced at the unpleasant stains covering his suit. "It wasn't enough to have it simply leave my grasp. If I did not do so by my own volition, it wouldn't have had the desired effect."

"Wh-what…? What are you talking about!?"

"I am talking about the Funa Yuurei," replied the detective.

However, Kurokawa had not actually been seeking an answer. The calm smile on the man's face was so frightening, that Kurokawa pulled the trigger on his hunting rifle once more.

Something odd happened once more.

The gun should have had bullets remaining, but nothing happened when he pulled the trigger.

"Zashou Island corresponds to the boat, the islander to the Funa Yuurei, and the hunting rifles to the water ladle, right? With that much preparation, there was no way to win by any normal means. After all, you had already easily destroyed a *large criminal organization* and a group of police."

"Fire, fire!! What are you doing!? Don't let him talk!!"

Kurokawa shouted at his comrades, but he received no reply. Kurokawa was able to guess why that was. Most likely, the same change had occurred in their guns.

They would not fire.

It was such a simple yet effective change.

“But there is a way out.” The detective continued while ignoring Kurokawa who was shouting as if keeping the detective from speaking would stop what was happening. “According to the stories, you will be saved if you give a bottomless water ladle to the Funa Yuurei. On Zashou Island, the hunting rifles take the place of the water ladle, right? In that case, you can do this to take the place of that protective charm!!”

The detective reached into his suit pocket and pulled out the brass cartridges for his handgun.

He had five shots in his hand.

Kurokawa had no way of knowing, but that was every bullet that had been in his revolver.

“An empty handgun. A water ladle that cannot carry out its proper role. Giving one of those to the Funa Yuurei will save those aboard the boat!!”

That was why the islanders’ hunting rifles were no longer working.

Kurokawa cast aside his “water ladle”.

He did not care if he was unable to use any tools. As if to say he was going to settle things in a more primitive manner, he tried to grab at the detective who had been shot in two places.

But he could not.

Kurokawa was knocked back partway to the detective as if there was an invisible wall in the way. He was knocked down to the rotting ground.

“You can’t do that,” said the girl quietly. “It would be one thing if you had tried to sink the boat with your bare hands from the beginning. However, we have already handed you the ‘bottomless water ladle’. Now that we have given you the ‘protective charm’ in the proper fashion, the lives of those aboard the boat are saved. That means we cannot be killed regardless of the presence of a power that can harm us. …Once they have been handed the ‘bottomless water ladle’, the Funa Yuurei will forget that they have the power to sink the boat with their bare hands.”

The gamble for the detective and the girl had been whether they could give the handgun to Kurokawa and the others of their own volition.

And they had succeeded in that.

Now, the Funa Yuurei were nothing but shackles for the islanders.

But even knowing that, the islanders were unable to get rid of the Package.

Youkai were not tools.

Putting together a Package was nothing more than intentionally causing the power of the Youkai to work towards your own ends. The Funa Yuurei were not obedient to the islanders.

The islanders had prepared Funa Yuurei in a way that led to their own gain, but the detective and the girl had altered that.

It was the same as how an advantageous position in chess could be completely overturned in a single turn. But the islanders were unable to flip over the chess board in a fit of anger.

As he leaned on the girl's shoulder, the detective whispered to her.

"…How about we escape?"

"Sounds good."

"I only have so many handcuffs and I have no idea where to find rope or anything else to tie them up with. But the next time we come here, we'll have a Package countermeasure and a warrant. Maybe a riot squad as well. We'll have to swipe one of their fishing boats, but it's better than staying on this island filled with rotting corpses."

They could not be stopped.

They could not be stopped.

They could not be stopped.

A single order from Kurokawa was supposed to bring 400 to 500 people down on any enemy, but they could not stop just two people.

And…

If those two left, all of the islanders’ ill deeds would come to light and only ruin would await them.

And yet “getting them to leave” had been their goal the entire time.

Part 12 (3rd person)

And so the outsiders left.

Kurokawa and the others left behind had something they had to do. They could not allow themselves to be arrested. There was no saving them once that happened. After killing enough people to have bodies scattered all over the island, there was no way they would survive being judged in a court of law. They would not escape the death penalty.

That left them few choices to protect themselves.

A large number of people would soon be coming to Zashou Island.

The order of the island would be destroyed on a level never before seen. It would all be swept away. They could predict that much. A wave was coming large enough to eliminate not just the society of Zashou Island but the village itself.

In that case, Kurokawa and the others had no choice but to "have them all leave".

This time, they would use everything available to them.

"Th-the Package! We need to reassemble the Package!! We need to make it stronger!!" Kurokawa shouted instructions to the islanders. "Whether it's a *large criminal organization* or the police, they need to come to the island to attack us. In that case, we just have to destroy them the instant they set foot on the island. It doesn't matter if we have to kill hundreds or even thousands!! We will crush all those who would get in our way!! That is the only way for Zashou Island to survive!!"

Most items used for everyday life in the Intellectual Village were ordered via the communications network and the internet, so the mainland would be able to apply external pressure to Zashou Island if it wanted to crush the island. However, Kurokawa and the others were so focused on the imminent threat that such thoughts did not enter their minds.

And something else did not enter their minds.

Namely, the possibility that something even more frightening awaited them before that “imminent threat” could arrive.

“Hello,” said a female voice.

The details of her appearance were unclear. Kurokawa could not even determine the exact shape of her face.

This was simply due to the fact that she was much too close to him. He was just barely able to tell it was a woman who was so close their noses were almost touching.

Kurokawa could not even imagine when she could have gotten that close to him.

The next thing he noticed was the utter silence.

The other islanders had been running around making plenty of noise just a moment before. He had been giving them instructions on how to reassemble the Funa Yuurei Package. All of that had disappeared. All that remained was a painful ringing in his ears.

If he just moved his head slightly to the side, he would be able to tell what was happening.

But he could not.

It was impossible.

He could not even attempt it.

He had no idea what horrible thing would happen if he let that woman out of his sight for even an instant. And so Kurokawa was unable to move a single eyeball, much less his head. It was as if he had been overcome with sleep paralysis.

“Maybe I went a little overboard here. Well, if this was an incident that the law could deal with, the penalties handed out by the law would have been enough. However, you went beyond that. So naturally the penalty must also go beyond what the law can provide.”

“Wh-what…?” Kurokawa felt his throat rapidly grow dry. “You’re not from the police… So are you from the *large criminal-*…?”

“Don’t put me on the same level as them.”

Her voice was neither especially loud nor especially high-pitched.

Her words came gently and smoothly. Nevertheless, there was something to the woman's voice that silenced Kurokawa in an instant.

"And to be honest it really doesn't matter who I am. But if you want to waste your precious question time on that, that's fine with me."

The woman held up a slender index finger.

"Hint 1: I am someone who does not want the likes of you to increase in number. However, I am not completely opposed to Youkai powers."

She raised her middle finger.

"Hint 2: There are some Youkai that are so dangerous you will die just from meeting them."

She raised her ring finger.

"Hint 3: Have you ever heard of the Hyakki Yakou?"

A week later when the typhoon had passed by Zashou Island, members of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department arrived at the island along with a riot squad. They found innumerable rotting corpses, but they were unable to find the perpetrators.

They would have assumed they had fled, but the islanders' fishing boats were still in the harbor.

And…

There was one thing the investigators could not know since the number of corpses was so great it would likely take months to identify them all.

Yes.

It was entirely possible the rotting flesh of the islanders was mixed in with all the other corpses.

Notes

1. ↑ While the term usually refers to exile, it can also be interpreted to mean something along the lines of "floating punishment".
2. ↑ Nure Onna literally means “wet woman”.
3. ↑ Zashou refers to a ship running aground.

Chapter 3: Regarding Hishigami Mai

Part 1

Hyakki Yakou.

I may have used the name on Zashou Island, but I did not actually belong to the group. I do not like going to the effort of explaining the annoying details of an organization's structure, and what does it matter if someone I am about to kill comes to the wrong conclusion?

"Excellent work," said a dignified voice.

The speaker wore a kimono and sat at the back of a tearoom that smelled of old-fashioned incense. Just hearing that, you might think it was an organization ruled by the elderly and left behind by the times, but the person wearing the kimono was a girl of about 10.

You could say the girl was a decoration.

She was a symbol of the downside of putting too much focus on bloodline.

When the previous generation was sent to an early grave, the leader became a child that was softer than a crab after molting. It was remarkable how the Hyakki Yakou's situation had so quickly shifted in a dangerous direction. There were rumors that a true conflict would occur soon and that rebellious elements were gathering from within the organization.

Nevertheless, the girl's expression remained unchanged.

The fact that she had been forced into a situation where she had needed to gain such control over her expressions at her age made me pity her.

"You will be paid in the usual fashion."

"Sure thing."

"Once you have confirmed receipt of your pay, are you willing to take on another job?"

"If I can take a three day vacation and the pay will be suitable for the job."

All the jobs I got were utter shit. They were consistently as low as they could get. But I would do any job as long as I was paid. That was how I lived my life.

I had less of an issue with this young lady’s jobs because they still had a bit of “softness” left.

For one thing, any professional would call it suicide for a VIP like her to meet someone like me face-to-face rather than using a middleman. It almost made me pity her that she had no aide loyal enough to stop her.

“What is the job?”

“Read this.”

The girl slid an envelope filled with documents toward me. I was still standing, so I stepped on the envelope as it slid along the tatami mats and then kicked it up. When I checked on the contents, I also found several pictures and a map with some marks on it.

“Shirakido City?”

“It is a rural city in Shinshu. The name is gone due to consolidations, but the area was one known as Ubasute Village. In fact, not even the original buildings of that village remain.”

“Yeah, the map only shows a dam.”

“That dam is set to be demolished,” said the girl softly. “The dam was constructed to develop the land for a normal rural city rather than an Intellectual Village. The old and extremely depopulated village ended up underwater. Anyway, it seems the recent fall of an influential person had an effect on the local government.”

“So they’re destroying the dam and restoring the sunken village?”

“Those in favor of turning it into an Intellectual Village have been quite active. We have no intention of interfering with that, but we fear that the process of restoration could bring something out from the depths of the water. Something that must not see the light of day.”

“So this is related to Youkai?”

“Yes, and on a level that requires the involvement of Hyakki

Yakou.”

Does that mean the Public Security Intelligence Agency has already gotten involved and suffered losses? They can be prideful, so they must have lost at least 4 or 5 men to be willing to ask Hyakki Yakou for help.

As I thought, the girl created a very serious mood.

“We need you to determine the details and then eliminate the threat if necessary.”

“Will you take care of any necessary expenses?”

“We will.”

The girl’s voice grew stiff.

When I said “necessary expenses”, I was not referring to money. I was asking if I could get unrelated people involved in order to approach the core of the case.

I had no intention of being sloppy enough to leave behind any trace of my involvement, but having some insurance in case I did took a large burden off my mind.

And that meant I had one more thing I had to check on.

“This job includes reconnaissance and destruction. Can the necessary expenses begin in the reconnaissance part of the job? If so, it is possible some of those expenses will only lead to dead ends.”

“I was prepared for that from the moment I decided to hire someone outside of the organization.”

“Excellent.”

She had the cutest responses.

I knew it put a burden on her, but I couldn’t help but do it sometimes.

I threw the envelope of documents back at the girl and turned around.

“Do you not need the documents?”

“I have already memorized them.”

I left the tearoom.

Antiquated design. An old-fashioned interior. A strange stillness. Everything about the place created an atmosphere that Youkai would like. I walked through an area like that and headed outside.

What I exited was not a Japanese house you would expect to find a Zashiki Warashi living in.

It was a giant V-shaped flying wing that was reminiscent of a stealth bomber. That large passenger plane was the highest-class aircraft available for personal ownership and it was that girl’s mobile base.

Amazingly, she also had eight generation 4.5 and generation 5 escort fighters, two large transport planes filled with the equipment and materials needed to maintain them, and a single aerial refueling craft. The flying wing had an antenna on top that looked like a giant plate and it could function on the level as any airborne warning and control aircraft, so she could break through territory controlled by a small air force if necessary. If its armaments were changed out, it could probably carry out a bombing mission.

“The fighters have to remain up above the clouds with the slow-moving flying wing for long periods at a time, so I heard they installed kitchens and bathrooms on the fighters. I wonder if that’s true.”

Officially, a group of instructors from a flight school that hired retired pilots had been brought in to test out the latest models from aerospace defense companies, but it must have required a lot of influence to force that explanation through. Those fighters were masses of national secrets, so it was not normal to let someone land them and their maintenance parts and equipment at airports around the world regardless of whether the airport belonged to an allied nation or not. In other words, Hyakki Yakou had enough trust or threat of violence to silence the complaints of a developed nation with nothing but a glance.

However…

“How sad,” I muttered as I walked down the stairs and onto the runway of the bayside international airport. “Spending so much money on something like this just tells everyone you would be in too much danger if you remained in one place.”

Part 2

I was within mountains covered in conifer trees. You know, the type of mountains you can find anywhere. It was the type of rural area that earned many a hateful gaze because of all the cedar allergies it would surely cause every spring. I was driving through it in a rental car I had borrowed under a false name.

I was headed for a run-down pension.

It was all an attempt to not stand out, but the unfashionable cars and lodging I always had to choose were difficult to put up with. It may have been in response to that kind of camouflage that, in their time off, hit men and spies wore showy outfits that looked like your average person dreaming of being someone from a movie.

When I arrived at my room, I did a sweep for cameras or bugs and then tossed my small bag onto the bed. I opened a case and pulled out some makeup equipment. I then opened a small hidden space and assembled the nonmetallic parts hidden within.

I ended up with a handgun small enough to fit in my palm and a suppressor that looked about three times as big. I was aware the suppressor completely ignored the small size of the actual gun.

That was when a child-like voice called out from below.

“Quite a strange piece of equipment you have there.”

“Reality doesn’t work like a Hollywood movie. Simply adding a suppressor to the barrel is not enough to completely silence the gunshot. The caliber was brought down this low in an attempt to keep it as quiet as possible.”

“And is that really necessary?”

“How should I know? It’s my job to investigate and find out. But it’s best to have it around if 100% safety cannot be guaranteed. Not that I’ve ever been in such a situation before.”

If I was in a situation where I had to rely on something like that in Japan, I had 80% lost already.

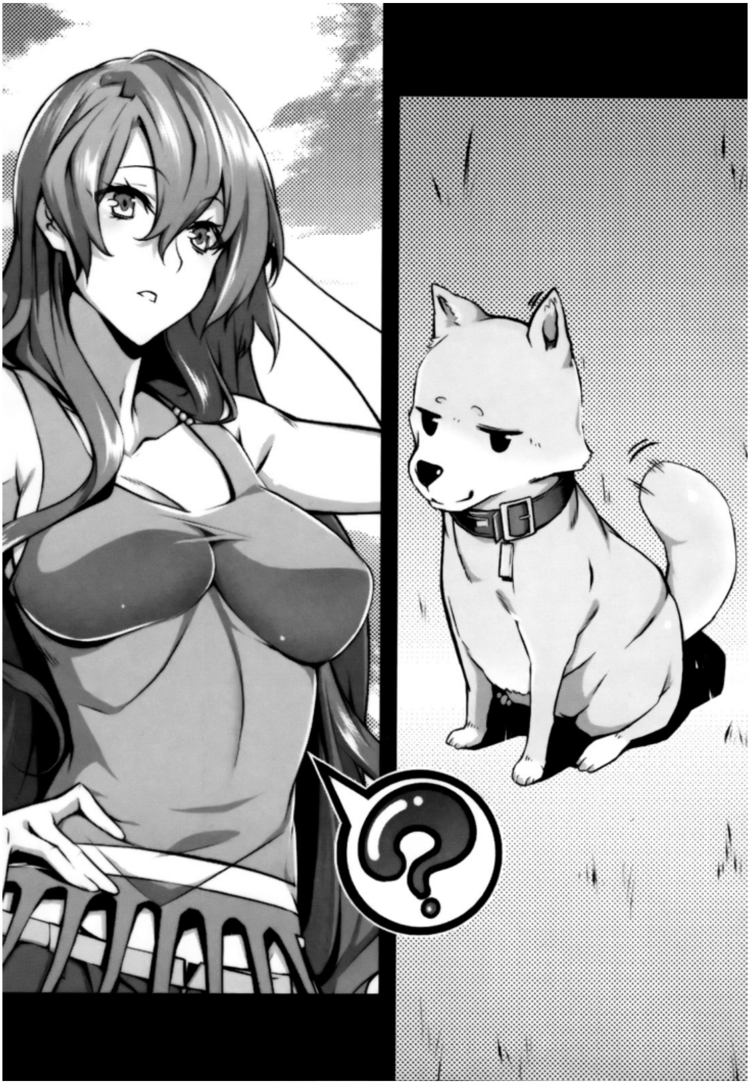
It was important to only begin a fight once you had prepared an environment where you did not need something like that.

“Shirakido City is…or rather, the ruins of Ubasute Village are 5 kilometers from here. This whole thing seems suspicious, so be careful,” said the voice.

“…One question.”

I hid the small handgun and the suppressor in my boot. My boots were like a type of trick art. There was a difference between how they looked and how much space there actually was. I was dressed like a stupid tourist with a tank top and hot pants on. The outfit was fairly revealing, so it had few places to hide a weapon.

At any rate, I lowered my gaze.



I lowered it down to the level of the voice I had been hearing.

This was not just at a child's height. I could not have spoken from that height without pressing my cheek flat against the floor.

"What are you?"

"What do you mean, what am I? I am a Sunekosuri. I am a Youkai. Have you never heard of a Sunekosuri?"

"You look like a small dog."

"I am a Youkai that looks like a small dog."

I knew that much, but my question was as to why the young lady of Hyakki Yakou would send something like that to me. I cast a doubtful look down toward the canine Youkai that was already wrapping around my ankle.

“What can you do as a Youkai?”

“That is not something I expected to hear from an agent even if you are a free one. A Sunekosuri rubs its cheek up against the shins of travelers.[1] Like this: Rub, rub.”

“What else?”

“That’s all.”

“Do you have the ability to steal the life energy of those travelers so they collapse or to send their sense of direction out of whack so they are suddenly headed in the wrong direction?”

“Please do not think that every Youkai in the world has some cool and useful ability.”

That was when I snapped.

“Oh, I can’t stand it!! You’re just so damn cute!!”

“Eee!? W-wait a second!! Don’t pick me up! I am called a Sunekosuri because I rub against shins! If you make me rub against your cheek, I will become a different kind of Youkai!!”

“Okay, okay. Then I’ll make you into a Paizuri[2] Youkai.”

“Let’s go with the cheek as a compromise! I have my dignity!! If I started being called by that name, I would seriously consider suicide!!”

I continued loving on the canine Youkai for a bit as he protested with every hair on his body standing on end. Afterwards, I straightened out my hair and tank top that were both covered in puppy fur.

“Okay, now that I’m refreshed, it’s about time I headed to the ruins of Ubasute Village.”

“…Heh…heh heh. Well done weakening a real Youkai in just a few minutes. I can see why Hyakki Yakou does business with you…”

And so I left the unfashionable pension, got in the unfashionable rental car, and headed for the unfashionable ruins.

The sloping ground around the winding mountain road was covered in cedar trees. The annoying cries of cicadas and mating calls of wild birds grew louder and I became wrapped in the boring atmosphere of the countryside.

“That must be the dam…It’s ruins, too?”

“Both the village and the dam are ruins, so it can get a bit confusing.”

I stopped the car in a small space along the mountain road that was meant for attaching chains to the tires. From there, I observed things from afar.

A giant concrete construction stood between two mountains. That was the dam. However, the massive amount of water it was supposed to be holding was gone. At the bottom of the empty reservoir were several half-rotten Japanese houses.

“They’re really thinking about restoring that? The foundations and central pillars have gone soft. And the roofs and walls are gone.”

“They were thatch roofs and mud walls, so it isn’t surprising that submerging the houses underwater did away with them.”

Not much time must have passed since the water had been removed because the ground was still muddy. It was a dark mud. The roads must have been paved before the area became the bottom of a dam reservoir, but you could no longer tell which parts were the ground and which parts were the road. Everything was completely covered in mud.

Several vehicles were parked around those constructions that were hard to call either ruins or simply abandoned. A family 4-door car was surrounded by construction equipment.

I pulled out a pair of binoculars and checked the face of the car’s owner.

“That must be a scholar staring at that diagram. To go that far, it looks more like they’re investigating an ancient kofun tomb than restoring an old village.”

“I wonder why they are so insistent to restore that village? There is no sign of the old residents returning.”

“With Intellectual Villages, it isn’t always logical. You could call it a religion that worships the rural or a sect that reveres nature. They are put together by those who wish to find value that exceeds any scientific findings.”

“?”

“Basically, it’s a collection of those thoughts along the lines of ‘things weren’t like this in the old days’ or ‘everything would be perfect if we could go back to how it used to be’. Of course, rural areas are not void of problems and there were crimes and social problems in the times people refer to as the ‘old days’. These people have the ability to forget everything inconvenient to their belief.”

“But is that all they are after? If so, I doubt Hyakki Yakou would have called you in.”

“That is what I need to investigate.”

“What if this is related to some deadly Youkai?”

“Mummies are sold at auctions. I hear oni and mermaids can get crazy high prices. I wonder why humans love making medicines out of Youkai so much.”

“…You agents are scary…”

The Sunekosuri began trembling, but I did not have time to pay it any heed. My instincts wanted me to rub him against my face and roll around with him, but I had to find a clue of where to start before the sun set.

“If Hyakki Yakou is taking action, this must be more than a simple Package.”

“Are you going to carry out some old-fashioned investigation? Y’know, keeping an eye on what they do and listening as they chat inside of restaurants. The information you get might be fairly random, though.”

“I haven’t seen a restaurant yet, so the only meal options might be catered bentos and food at the inn. I have a faster method.”

“Wh-what is with that daring smile?”

“I just need to tear down these stable circumstances.”

Part 3

The survey into restoring the ruins of Ubasute Village continued on into the night.

However, it did not continue straight through the night. At around 11:00, the giant lights of the type used in theatres were turned off. The workers who had been operating heavy machinery meant for surveying and boring began preparations to leave.

There was one small prefab building clearly prepared for a scholar rather than the construction workers.

After I saw someone enter that building, I pressed up against its door.

Unfortunately for them, the lock only had five disks in it.

I could open a lock like that in 15 seconds.

“Wh-who are you? Where did you come from?”

The older man who seemed to be a scholar cried out in surprise, but I grinned when I heard it. To a normal person, that grin had to have seemed quite creepy.

Yes, to a normal person.

“You are a scholar, aren’t you? But not in architecture. A folklorist perhaps?”

“Um…”

“No, I guess not. A folklorist wouldn’t have a callus on the joint of his right thumb. You get that from shooting a gun too much.”

“When I was investigating ruins in Cambodia and Colombia, I carried a gun for self defense.”

“You won’t get a callus unless you were being quite proactive about firing your gun. It would take 5 to 6 thousand shots.” I held up my index finger. “Also, I can smell gun oil on you even now, so you must still use a gun. Sorry, but a deodorant isn’t going to get rid of that smell.”

"…"

"…"

The scholar and I fell silent.

Total silence fell.

However, a change occurred without noise.

Just after the older man's bewildered smile completely disappeared…

Something happened.

When I returned to the unfashionable rental car, the Sunekosuri who had remained in the car spoke to me. He seemed flustered. It appeared he had used the screen of the car's navigation system to watch the news.

"Look what I just saw. Here. Look."

"I'm exhausted from my work. Help refresh me, puppy."

"Gyaaaaaaaaahhhh!? Please do not turn me into a Matakosuri[3] Youkai! Anyway, the news! You need to see what is on the news!!"

"Wahh?"

"Don't tilt the seat all the way back like you are about to go to sleep! They said a scholar involved in the survey to restore Ubasute Village committed suicide!! He hanged himself!!"

"Yeah, yeah. Why do you think I'm so tired?"

"Um…"

"What?"

"Why would a scholar killing himself make you tired?"

"Why do you think?"

The Sunekosuri trembled in silence.

"The scholar's name was Matsukai Hiroshi. That was a fake name of course," I said.

"Then once word of this spreads, the police and media will look into his real name, right?"

"In this age of electronic medical records stored in the cloud, it won't be that easy. Whether it's teeth, fingerprints, or blood, data can easily be overwritten in this day and age." I yawned. "Matsukai Hiroshi is not a fake name he came up with on his own. It was a disposable name used by a group that does bad things. But different organizations have different tendencies in the names they use. This was probably related to Saishi Kajin[4]. They like to keep an intellectual air to the things they do."

"Saishi Kajin?"

"It's a group that is trying to *create* an ultimate beauty by any means necessary whether she is human or Youkai. Their actions are fundamentally driven by primitive desires, but that gives them a powerful drive. They are not the type to care much about taboos."

"But doesn't the idea of beauty change from time period to time period and from region to region?"

"That is exactly why they wish to create a beauty so absolute that it cannot be shaken by such things. I have no idea how successful they have been, though. It's possible they are just barely getting by on a side business using the techniques they have developed in the research process or they could have completed this beauty of theirs and everyone in the organization is now her slave."

Since they were rooted in base desires, I did not have a good impression of them. Of course, people who did nothing but proclaim their bland sense of justice could be just as frightening in their own way.

"The organization is made up of relatively few people, but they are said to be skilled. For that reason, the surrounding larger organizations are eager to take them in. That has made the power balance very complicated and made it very difficult to do anything about them. They probably created that dangerous method of organization intentionally. They can force all the dirty work onto the large organizations that are trying to score points with them." I grabbed the remote for the car's navigation system and changed the channel from the boring news program to a national late night variety show. "Now then. Whatever circumstances may be developing around Ubasute Village, one of the core members of the plan is gone. Who will act to correct this and how?”

“I-I…I can’t believe this!! You killed someone just for that!? I can’t tell who the real villain is here!!”

“Well, I’m certainly not on the side of justice. That’s the role for my little sister and that detective.”

I had obtained a few phone numbers and email addresses from Matsukai Hiroshi’s cell phone. I used those to prepare for my next action. Naturally, this too was something illegal. It was not exactly the type of work you could be proud of.

“Y-your nickname of the Killer Dragon Princess wasn’t just a name…”

“That name doesn’t refer to me. It refers to my Shikigami. Not that I get much use out of it,” I said with a yawn.

I was not looking forward to the annoying process of intercepting phone calls and emails. Of course, there was no point in continuing on if I got nothing after 3 hours from the corpse’s discovery. Once that time came, I would return to the unfashionable pension and go to sleep.

“Now then. Let’s hope they hurry up and make a mistake.”

“Wh-what if they don’t?”

“Then I'll keep doing this until they do.”

Part 4

And then the next day arrived.

"…O-oh, shit. This is more than I expected. I might actually die."

"Is that all you have to say after picking a fight with them!? Really!?"

I sat down on the hood of the rental car as I ignored the canine Youkai that was wrapping around my calves.

I held a cell phone in my right hand.

I had stopped the car a bit away from the unfashionable pension to make the call.

I was of course speaking with the young lady of Hyakki Yakou.

"So the idea that it is Saishi Kajin is all but confirmed?" she asked. "Do you need reinforcements?"

"They would just end up stabbing me in the back, so no thanks. If this is really Saishi Kajin I'm up against, I will end up surrounded if too much time passes. It looks like my only option is to crush the core of the problem quickly. This will be decided in the next 6 hours."

"Do you have a specific objective?"

"A possible one. If this has to do with Saishi Kajin, it will be more than a simple attempt to establish a system of mass producing a Package. They must have had an important reason to demolish the dam and uncover the sunken ruins. And two months later, some dangerous people are growing active in the area. I can see why someone like me was called in."

"If you simply cannot handle it, you can always retreat. Your life takes precedence."

"But running away would just get me cornered. My only way out is through the center of Saishi Kajin, so let me take care of this in the next 6 hours. If I'm going to be taken out, I can at least take them with me."

I then ended the call before the worried young lady could say anything I would rather she didn't.

The Sunekosuri looked up from my legs with suspicious eyes.

"And you were acting so tough yesterday… You know, if you are really in a bind, maybe you should hide. Even if you have grasped the truth behind what is occurring in the ruins of Ubasute Village, it will all be for waste if you get killed.

"I haven't actually grasped the truth yet."

"…"

The Sunekosuri fell silent.

Oh, c'mon. Don't look up at me with those puppy dog eyes. I'll fall in love with you.

"If I knew that, I would have told the young lady. I intercepted Saishi Kajin's phone calls and email messages last night, remember? I didn't get much information from that, but I did find *some terminology I couldn't make any sense of* mixed in with all the worthless data. All I did here was use it in arbitrary ways while speaking with the young lady." I waved my cell phone in front of the dumbfounded Sunekosuri. "I may have put in a dummy SIM card, but it has no randomizer program. Why do you think I was using a phone with such half-assed security? I wanted Saishi Kajin to intercept it."

"Wh-what? You…You will even use Hafuri-sama of Hyakki Yakou as a tool…!?"

"She won't get mad over something like this. Those who take advantage of her influence might get a bit upset, though."

"B-but…Will that really work? Can they really target that conversation with such pinpoint accuracy yet still not know who you are?"

"Saishi Kajin is not just targeting me. In fact, I doubt they have even been able to narrow down the suspects much." I gave a sigh. "This is not a large city or a heavily-guarded Intellectual Village. In rural areas, they can set up a single cell phone tower to cover a wide area. That means you just have to attach a device or program at a single point to monitor all nearby communications."

“So after one of the people in charge of their plan mysteriously committed suicide yesterday, they decided to intercept all forms communications to gather as much information on the incident as possible?”

“Exactly.”

“But that would give them a massive amount of data. Your conversation might get buried under it all.”

“It won’t. I had a direct connection to Hyakki Yakou’s mobile base. Anyone who participates in any kind of underground business would be able to tell the importance of the call just by looking at the 11-digit phone number. Saishi Kajin will be all over that call.” I got down from the unfashionable rental car. “Now then. I set a 6 hour time limit. I set that limit myself despite having no real basis for it. With any luck, Saishi Kajin will fall for it and quickly start strengthening the security of what matters most. That will serve as a handy guide.”

Part 5

As expected, the enemy made their move. What I did not expect was for Saishi Kajin's secret to not be located at the dam or the ruins of Ubasute Village. The group of men wearing work uniforms headed to the rural city located a bit away from the mountainous region.

It was Shirakido City.

I tailed them in the car, but…how should I put it? It was just too cliché.

It was the stereotypical failure.

When a city was modernized on the surface alone, it received an incredibly weak flow of incoming people and money. As a result, it would lose its ability to function as a city. The buildings along the large main road were empty after corporations had left, so it was in its final days. And the local shopping district showed no signs of prosperity either.

Despite how overwhelmingly pitiable a condition the city was in, it also had all sorts of pollution from exhaust and the like, so there was no saving it. The whole place looked like it was one closed suburban shopping center away from the residents having nowhere to buy anything.

"I think I heard this place was urbanized out of a dislike for the rural aesthetic of Intellectual Villages."

It must have been once that had failed that they had started trying to appeal to nature lovers.

I had my doubts about how well that would work, though.

A natural environment was like your savings. When you were in the black, a bit of fluctuation was no big deal, but once you fell into the red, it was near impossible to recover. Well, it may have been because the residents understood that fact that they were focusing on redeveloping the area outside the city where some nature remained. But their estimations were too naïve. They were being too optimistic in their calculations. Intellectual Villages went beyond the actual numbers. They pushed up the value of their products as rarities by using the brand image of the beauty of nature and loveliness of rural areas. It would be incredibly difficult to create an Intellectual Village in an area that had been urbanized and therefore had its environmental image “polluted”.

“Maybe the restoration of the old village from the bottom of the dam is meant to give them a large event they can publicize.”

Not that it mattered.

My job was to bring to light what was hidden behind it.

Thinking about such unrelated matters would only bore me. Perhaps I had grown lonely. After all, I did not have the pretty Sunekosuri with me. Yeah, that had to be it. That canine Youkai said he had problems with modern urban areas. The young lady’s flying wing may have been fine because of the altered interior, but we had passed through a few large cities on the way to the ruins of Ubasute Village. That Youkai must have been putting up with it and hiding inside the bag the whole time.

What a cute little guy.

Once I get back to the pension, I’ll love him to death with a brush.

As I had that thought, I heard an electronic tone coming from the bag in the passenger seat. It was coming from a cell phone. However, this was not the one I had allowed them to intercept the calls from. It was a satellite phone with a high-level randomizer program installed. It did not use the local cell phone towers, so Saishi Kajin had no way to intercept the signal.

I ignored the traffic laws and pulled out the satellite phone. I grimaced when I saw the screen.

“…A government-use classified number.”

Despite the name, the number was not used by any office of the Japanese government. An organization independent from the country had set up a system with that name. People from the world I lived in felt it was okay to use that name as they were doing things the government should have been doing.

In other words, it was Hyakki Yakou.

“Hello?”

"You used me to set a trap for the enemy, didn't you?"

"Huh? You're using a different number from before."

"I could not call on the same line as before. Once I know what is going on, I can take the necessary measures. The enemy cannot overhear us with this phone."

The necessary measures, hm?

I was willing to bet she had grabbed onto the clothes of one of her young men in black who acted as her guards and looked up at him with tears in her eyes. It was only so effective because she did not realize what she was doing. The instant she tried to do it on purpose, it would lose all effectiveness.

"So what do you want, young lady? I'm kind of in the middle of tailing those pain-in-the-ass enemies you were talking about."

"Do not call me 'young lady'. My name is Hafuri. Also, I do not mind if you get me involved, but I do hope you have taken the bare minimum of precautions. Otherwise, you will just be putting yourself in more danger."

That was why people like her could be so dangerous when they did not even realize what they were doing.

Also, I wanted to avoid having anyone worry for me as it would throw me off my game. I especially wanted to avoid any "kind distractions" when I was in the middle of a dirty job. That was the biggest reason that pros got themselves killed.

"You said you are tailing the enemy?"

"Yes, yes. Oh, I think we've arrived. It looks like a storage locker facility. …Although I'm willing to bet it's just disguised to look like one and the entire facility belongs to Saishi Kajin."

"A storage locker facility?"

"It's a kind of storehouse. Or are you so old fashioned I need to call it a dozou[5] for you to understand?"

"…"

Ah, she's upset. This is what makes her so cute.

The area may have originally been a parking lot. The ground was nothing but cracked asphalt. A number of simple storage lockers about the size of a van were lined up along the asphalt.

A large city full of one-room apartments for students was one thing, but Shirakido City was primarily a rundown commuter town filled with one-story houses with yards. There was no way that many storage lockers were necessary. It was clearly a dummy facility.

A number of sedans were parked at the facility.

It seemed some other personnel had been gathered in addition to the ones I had been tailing. There were about 20 in all. Most of them wore work uniforms. This was not out in the middle of the country where hunting rifles were common, so a gunshot would have seemed too out of place. That may have been why none of them were openly carrying a gun.

However, the odds were good they had an almost silent low-caliber gun + suppressor, a crossbow small enough to fit in a business bag, or something similar.

At the very least, they were the type of people that would have more than just knives.

Anyone without some kind of projectile weapon in this day and age was just an idiot.

“What are you going to do now?” asked the young lady of Hyakki Yakou.

“I’ve found Saishi Kajin’s secret base, so obviously I’m going to go investigate what’s inside.”

“But I thought the enemy had gathered there due to your trap?”

“They have.”

“I hope I do not have to tell you how overwhelmingly they must outnumber you. I do not see how you can break through them without quite an excellent plan.”

“I’m sure I’ll figure something out.”

Part 6

I approached the storage locker facility from the front, caused a bit of trouble, and then returned to the car to retrieve my investigation tools. It was annoying, but those tools were too delicate to bring with me when I went on a rampage.

I heard the voice of that proper young lady coming from the satellite phone I had left in the car.

“What happened?”

“Summertime food poisoning can be pretty scary. But I guess it’s bound to happen when you get a bunch of filthy guys gathered together eating junk food in such an unsanitary place.”

“…Did you use a stun gun?”

“Don’t be silly. That would leave burns which would give it all away. Strings and wires also leave obvious marks. I recommend a wide rubber belt.”

“I do not see how you could have pulled it off with just that. Are you sure you are not relying on the paranormal too much?”

“It doesn’t eat into me or anything, so you don’t have to worry about it, young lady.”

There were plenty of things you could do to an unconscious person.

For example, you could make it look like they had food poisoning.

After grabbing the satellite phone and my bag of tools, I left the car and entered the storage locker facility. I arbitrarily chose one of the many small storage lockers and headed for its keyhole.

“Oh, good for them. The lock has been switched out for a decent one,” I commented.

“Can you open it?”

“If not, I can melt the lock with chemicals.”

Luckily, I did not need any powerful acids. I pushed in the pins within the lock using my many tools.

When the door opened, a horrible stench wafted out.

“…What is this? It’s worse than a judo team but not as bad as a kendo team.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t,” I commented offhandedly as I glanced through the small storage locker.

It had a few simple steel shelves inside. On one shelf was a “mass” inside of a clear plastic bag. It was a bit smaller than a pillow, I suppose. Its overall coloring was brown, but it was blackened at a few points. The color was similar to that of an old Japanese house’s central pillar.

Now, then. What is this?

“It looks like some kind of dried food.”

“Is it fish?”

“It looks like a Nekomata.”

I was not joking.

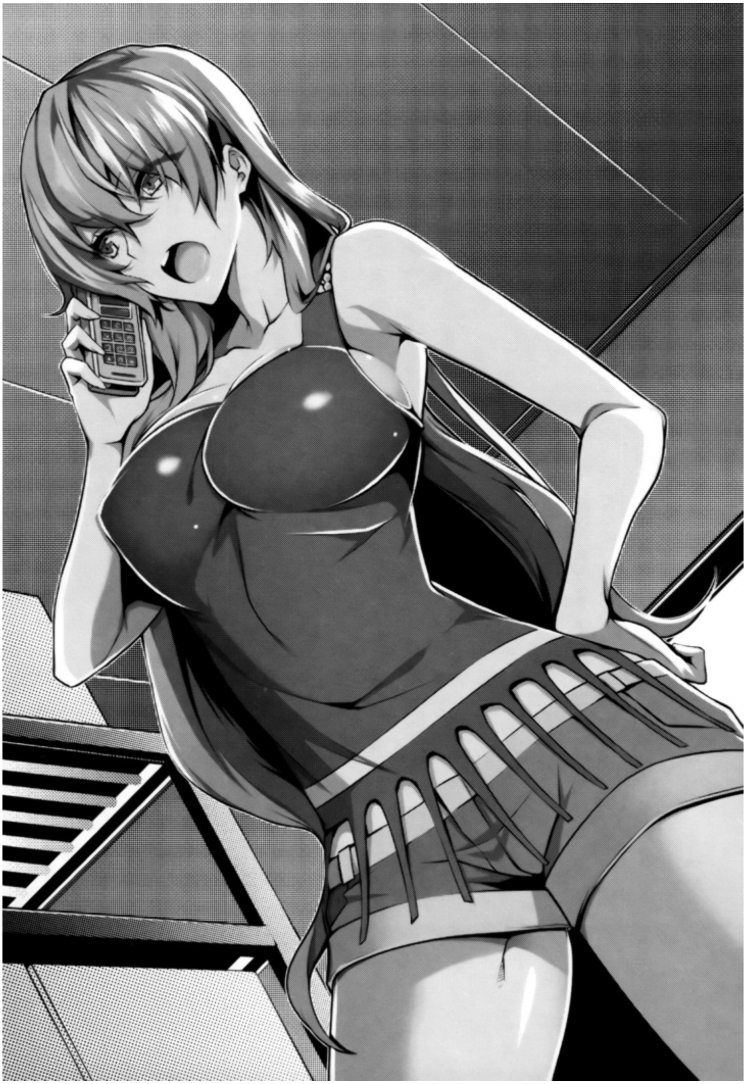
The corpse of an animal that had starved to the point of its bones being clearly visible through its skin had then been dried into a mummy. It looked like a cat, but it had two tails.

“Youkai body parts can be used for various medicines, right? Medicines that provide effects modern medical science cannot reproduce.”

“But Youkai cannot be so easily killed,” said the young lady.

“This one’s clearly dead.” I lightly poked at the dried mummy through the plastic. “Saishi Kajin is not using Youkai to put together a Package. They are killing Youkai, chopping them up, and selling them.”

“That is a new development. Does that mean the enemy is secretly working in the ruins of Ubasute Village in order to more efficiently acquire the Youkai they need to-…”



“Young lady,” I said, cutting off the head of Hyakki Yakou. “What I hate most in this world is people pretending not to know something they know. I hate that because it has a tendency to cause unnecessary tragedies. …You hired someone outside your organization for this job because you know something about what is going on, didn’t you?”

“What are you-…?”

“Does the area around the ruins of Ubasute Village produce a lot of Nekomatas? Who cares? You can find Nekomatas almost anywhere. They aren’t worth demolishing a dam for.”

I then focused on the stiches at the base of the Nekomata's tail.

That's right. Stiches.

"Increasing the number of tails on a dead cat is easy. You just have to sew on a tail from another cat. At the very least, it's easier than creating a Hitosume Kozou. This kind of business used to be quite common back in the day. Fake Youkai medicines. …So how much do you know about this, young lady?"

You could call it an imitative concept. There was more than just the Nekomata there. Their exact types were hard to tell as they had all been mummified, but I could see what had been made to look like several other types of Youkai I recognized. The insides would of course have to have been rearranged as well as the outward appearance. Mummifying them with their decomposing-prone organs still inside had to be difficult.

I was not fond of that type of spiritual medicine that used Youkai as ingredients because the thought process seemed to lead to cannibalism.

If you ate an excellent creature, you would gain an excellent body. If you ate a long-lived creature, you would gain a long life. If you ate a creature with a special power, you would awaken to that special power. The thought process was simple enough, but the same thought process would lead you to eat a beautiful person to become beautiful.

Also, the world was not that simple.

Eating fish did not let you live in the ocean.

Creatures like that Sunekosuri laughed and cried just like humans did. I felt anyone who wanted to eat such creatures had horribly missed the mark. And the thought of straightening out the thoughts of those people gave me a bit of motivation.

Then again, it was the proper members of Hyakki Yakou that were supposed to deal with people like that, not me.

"All I know is that a business of that sort supposedly had its headquarters in Ubasute Village before it was submerged by the dam," replied Hafuri-chan of Hyakki Yakou after a bit of hesitation. "Dragon scales, Nekomata mummies, Oni horns… They were said to be deeply involved in black market sales of such spiritual medicines all over the country. There was a clear discrepancy between Ubasute Village's industrial foundation and the amount of money coming in, so those suspicions are more or less confirmed."

"And why was the village submerged by the dam?"

"That was not Hyakki Yakou's doing. However, it was carried out by those who were not fond of such activities."

"Well, you're not going to make people very happy if you give them fake medicine after they pay such a high price. And the people who want that kind of medicine are being greedy about their own lives. Their grudges are likely to grow beyond the actual amount of money they lost."

"…But is that really so?"

"Hmm?"

"We have a few reports from those who took the spiritual medicines thought to have been produced in Ubasute Village. Most of them say they had no effect, but some say the medicines were effective against their spiritual symptoms related to Youkai."

"And it wasn't just the placebo effect?"

"Surely you of all people know that Youkai attacks are not something a placebo can deal with."

…She had a point there.

If a state of mind could deal with a Youkai attack, the organization known as Hyakki Yakou would not exist in the first place.

"It may have been the opposite," continued Hafuri-chan.

"You mean most of those who used the spiritual medicines were falsely convinced they were experiencing harm from a Youkai, so the spiritual medicines had no effect on them?"

"Yes, only the few who reported the medicines as effective were suffering from real spiritual symptoms. For one thing, I doubt spiritual symptoms related to Youkai would be that common."

"And your average nouveau riche has no way of knowing the truth of the matter."

It may have been similar to being tricked in an expensive art deal. Or perhaps it was closer to being led astray by a terrible prophet or fortune teller.

Maybe I'm just prejudiced, but it always seemed to me that the nouveau riche had a habit of seeing things in whatever way was most convenient for them.

It wouldn't surprise me if they either simply had a string of bad luck or forgot about all the ill will they had earned in the process of making their money, and then assumed it was all due to some Youkai cursing them.

They could be overly sensitive about things related to themselves, but downright shameless when it came to others.

That was just how the nouveau riche were.

Of course, I was hardly deluded enough to think old money families were filled with compassion and chivalry.

"But I don't see how this sewn-together mummy could possibly be a real Nekomata."

"That is not the issue. It is clearly fake. They seem to have some kind of technique that gives a dried-up mummy made from multiple animals the spiritual medicinal effects of the same parts of a real Youkai. If this is true, the enemy here is a much greater threat than a group that has simply produced a Package."

"You mean it's possible they're releasing real spiritual medicines?"

I had no idea what effects they might have, but something that directly altered natural and physical laws would be very bad indeed. For example, you could scatter something about an area to make any bullets fired within that area automatically miss you. Or perhaps it would create a field that would destroy your target's brain when you snapped your fingers.

If one had several of those products…that is, mummies, the different types could be used to create many different effects.

"If so, this could be worse than that person from your top 5…what was his name? Anyway, the one that uses illness magic. Would it be something like an Onmyouji who has a bunch of charms as if he is playing a card game?"

Then again, an actual Onmyouji didn't use a single charm for everything. They would do some pretty boring things, too. Like Katatagae[6].

The trick to maintaining one's influence was to hide those more plain and boring aspects. They had to create the illusion of being able to do anything. That business likely died out because they could no longer fool those around them.

At any rate, it was possible these spiritual medicine…emulators I suppose you could call them. Anyway, it was possible they simply had enough power within them to create a convenient illusion for the amateurs that used them.

As for how much of a threat it was…Well, I suppose you could say it would be like a super hero from American comic books barging into a serious fight in real life.

"If we are talking about the effectiveness of the individual medicines, my top 5 would be higher, but these spiritual medicines are tools. The skill or nature of the user does not matter. Being able to mass produce the occult would be seen as quite valuable," said the girl. "Also, the use of real Youkai in this fashion is simply too expensive because no one has yet found an efficient way to slay Youkai. It is more or less impossible for a human to kill a Youkai after all. However, if the exact same effects can be reproduced by combining animal corpses, the cost and skill barriers drop considerably."

…True enough.

If spiritual symptoms could be freely manipulated with no side effects as simply as wielding a sword or gun, the situation would truly grow hellish. And if the entire organization of Saishi Kajin could use that kind of power, Hyakki Yakou may have been in real trouble as it was but a shell of its former self.

The young lady's bodyguards were the type that relied on normal bullets. Even if it was to expand the organization, Hyakki Yakou had strayed too far from its original role and made too many human enemies.

It was possible we were up against a large scale paranormal unit armed with offensive spiritual medicines.

Could the current Hyakki Yakou really stand up to an opponent like that?

“…But for a group with such amazing ideas, all the Saishi Kajin soldiers I’ve beaten up have lacked any distinguishing personalities.”

“It is possible the enemy’s plan is still in the testing phase and they have yet to begin mass production.”

“We can’t base our strategy off of an assumption.”

It was possible they had a large force they had yet to use and it was also possible all our speculation was simply wrong.

However, I did agree that Saishi Kajin’s plan was likely in its central stages. If it was already complete, they would have no reason to be secretly working away in the ruins of Ubasute Village. They were likely having difficulty digging up the knowhow they needed from Ubasute Village.

What I was looking at felt like prototype versions based on fragmentary data.

“Whatever the case, I have the feeling I will get myself in serious trouble if I don’t start taking this more seriously,” I said.

“Yes, you have been taking this much too lightly.”

“This isn’t the kind of job that puts a serious expression on my face.”

“And that thinking is what tells me you are taking this too lightly.”

Part 7

I left the Nekomata mummy (?) where it was. I had no idea what effects it had, and I was not about to have it curse me because I took it with me. That was well beyond what I could handle with the investigation tools I carried with me.

I didn't like the idea of leaving without doing anything, so I decided to burn the storage lockers containing the prototype spiritual medicines.

Saishi Kajin had a few cars parked outside, so I had plenty of gasoline.

When I returned to the unfashionable pension, the Sunekosuri spoke to me in the usual manner.

"U-u-um… They just said on the news that there was a huge fire in Shirakido City."

"Yeah, I'm tired."

"So you're tired this time, too…"

"Really tired."

I grabbed the canine Youkai and put him in the sink to give him a bath. That helped get me out of my irritable mood.

"Huh? Why are you giving me a bath?"

I ignored the Sunekosuri's confused comment and collapsed onto the bed.

I did that kind of thing for fun.

"It's about time for the climax."

I had burned Saishi Kajin's storerooms. They could not sell the prototype versions, so the only reason for them to have so many in storage was to use them for the further development of those spiritual medicine emulators. It was the same as a master potter smashing his failures. It was not a fit of anger. He needed to smash them in order to view the broken edges to check how the heat had passed through them.

The best way to create was not simply to mass produce successes.

Your rate of growth could be greatly changed depending on whether you were able to use the failures that are inevitably made in the process of creation or not.

The total number of spiritual medicines in the form of mummies made up of different animal corpses inside those storage lockers had been between four and five hundred.

In my estimation, they would cut fine pieces off of the failures to inspect them under a microscope and see how they reacted to reagents. Through that process, they could discover fine adjustments to their methods that would let them create the ideal spiritual medicines.

Saishi Kajin would not be able to remain calm with all of those samples burned.

They would definitely make some kind of mistake.

I had to find where they were actually creating the mummies as well as their source of funds. The incident was far from resolved.

“But should you really have done that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Doesn’t this method of angering your enemy so they will make a mistake just make them hate you all the more? It seems to me you are exposing yourself to more and more danger the farther your plan advances.”

“Can I hug you?”

“Why would you say that all of a sudden!?”

“Because you’re just so cute. But to answer your other question, that is an issue that has long since passed.”

“Passed?”

“There was no way we could peaceably get along from the moment we set ourselves up as opposing forces. If I am going to worry about whether I want them to hate me or not, I need to do it when I am deciding whether to accept the job or not. It’s too late to think about that kind of thing by the time you have taken the job and need to take hostile actions against them.”

“Can you really get by like that?”

“If I couldn’t, I would not have survived as long as I have,” I said casually.

Also, no matter what I was thinking, my enemies would not hesitate. There was something wrong about challenging someone to a fight and announcing you are going to punch them in the face as hard as you can but then becoming afraid of making them mad.

“The quickest way to both get things done and make sure you are not dragged down by your enemy’s grudge is to beat them so thoroughly they can no longer fight back. Once you have decided to do something, you cannot hesitate. Stepping on the brakes only increases the risk. Just like with the long jump and the high jump, you need that running start.”

“So is that the ironclad rule of the Killer Dragon Princess?”

“That isn’t my name; it’s my Shikigami’s name,” I corrected. “And if I have to resort to bringing that out, I have 100% lost.”

“?”

Part 8

The end came about rather easily.

12 hours after I set the fire in the storage locker facility, a simple bit of news reached my ears as I continued to monitor for phone calls or emails.

It came from the television the Sunekosuri was watching.

I don’t know if it was because it was a local station or because of the scope of the incident, but an emergency live broadcast began in the middle of another show.

Enough body parts for 7 people had been discovered in the mountains near Shirakido City. A resident of the area had called the police after spotting a wild dog digging them up. The wording made it clear the bodies had been chopped to pieces.

The bodies were in the process of being transported, so the autopsy would not have been carried out yet. However, the report said it was likely the bones had been crushed with a blunt weapon and then some sharp blade had been used to cut them apart while ignoring the anatomical joints. Naturally, the police would not be giving out details at such an early stage, so someone from the media may have gotten a shot through the gaps in the blue sheets sealing off the crime scene and then analyzed the photo. Super telephoto lenses had come a long way in recent times. The uniformed police officers wouldn’t have been able to keep complete control over all the people on the scene.

“What a sloppy job,” I commented.

“Eh? Eh? What do you mean?”

“There were several emails sent within Saishi Kajin debating whether they should pay the fine for breach of contract or find an escape route, but the emails suddenly stopped before they found an actual route. Those mutilated corpses likely belong to the researchers who were actually creating those spiritual medicine animal mummies.”

Of course, it was also possible they had prepared corpses to fake their own deaths…but I doubted that was it. A plan like that would have required its own secret strategy meeting.

“But then who did it…? Wait, don’t tell me it was you!”

“I’ve been here the whole time. My guess would be Saishi Kajin’s sponsor. Saishi Kajin was accurately manipulating the insides and outsides of animals to create those mummies, so that crude method of crushing the bones to make them easier to cut just doesn’t seem like a method they would use. The methods used here was just so different that I doubt it was infighting within the organization.”

“Their sponsor? You mean for the spiritual medicines?”

“You don’t create a product if you don’t have any customers. Whoever this is likely paid quite a bit up front. But now that the storage lockers have been turned to ash, the sponsor likely decided they could not complete the planned development in the planned amount of time.”

“So the sponsor got mad when they realized they weren’t going to get their money back…?”

“Or perhaps they feared getting dragged down by that failing organization and cut them off like a lizard does its tail.”

I let out a smile without meaning to.

It was all so perfect that I was a bit suspicious of it being a trap.

“It was all just so sloppy. Sloppy is the only word I can use to describe it. A wild dog dug them up! The mere fact that they were buried in Shirakido City shows they didn’t know what they were doing. You can crush them down to the bones and create meatballs for fish food, you can dump them into a business-use aerobic bacteria compost facility where things like cow bones are sent, or you can use a crematory or any other facility that does not raise suspicion when human-sized flesh and bones are burned in it. Basically, there is no way someone who knows how to dispose of a body properly would just bury them near the crime scene.”

“Wait, doesn’t this mean you were indirectly responsible for this!?”

“Well, I was planning to destroy them all eventually.”

“Wh-what are you going to do now?”

“What I was hired to do. I will continue to look into where the remnants of Saishi Kajin have gone, but they’ve probably been buried somewhere else. I also have to figure out who this sponsor is and eliminate them as well. After such a sloppy job, I’m sure they’ve left a few traces behind. It shouldn’t be too hard to pursue them.”

I intercepted some police radio transmissions and it seemed a few pieces of physical evidence had already been discovered at the crime scene. They had easily found hints to look into. For example, they could look into where the blade thought to have chopped the corpses up had been bought, and the tire tracks could be used to look into the make and model of the car used.

“The sponsor must be panicking right about now. I’m sure they’re intercepting this as well.”

“What are you doing?”

“I want to get in touch with this sponsor.”

“But you don’t know how to contact them.”

“This sponsor slaughtered Saishi Kajin, mutilated the corpses, and then dumped them in the mountains. The sponsor must have taken their clothes and possessions. If I send emails to all of the cell phones and computers belonging to those dead manufacturers, I may be able to get in touch.”

Even if the sponsor had thrown out all of the electronic equipment, they might still be monitoring the victims’ addresses left using Saishi Kajin’s leftover server. That way, the sponsor could ensure there were none who had escaped.

And I could use that.

I of course employed a few tricks to ensure they could not determine my own address.

Someone else and I would be communicating via emails sent to addresses belonging to dead members of Saishi Kajin, and neither of us would be able to determine anything more than that.

The other side would be unable to tell whether I was an individual or an organization. I would hide as much information as possible to keep them as suspicious of everyone else as possible.

“What are you going to do once you contact them?”

“Make a decoy job proposal. I will tell them the police are probably going to track them down, but that I can take care of that for them. What do you think they will do?”

“…Won’t they find that suspicious?”

“Of course. That’s the entire point. I make them think I’m setting a trap so they will attempt to kill me instead. Once they try that, I can round them all up at once. That will bring this whole incident to an end.”

“B-but won’t they just run away if they think it’s a trap? They’re already trying to run away from everything to get to some safe place. I doubt they will be up for a dangerous gamble.”

“They will,” I replied immediately. “This sponsor knows what happened to Saishi Kajin. Especially the incident of the burned mummies. The person who did that to Saishi Kajin has now set her sights on the sponsor. If they want safety, they cannot just ignore this. The only safety will come from killing me.”

I sent emails to all of the Saishi Kajin addresses.

I received a response from this unknown other party after half an hour.

They must have had trouble figuring out what to do.

However, that was not simply how long it took to come up with an actual plan. Most of the time had likely been spent panicking, wondering whether it was a trap, and worrying over what to do if it was a trap. All they had been able to do was respond before too suspicious a length of time had passed and then figure out what to do in the time until we met up.

“This is going to be easy. What will you do, Sunekosuri?”

“I am not going. There is simply no way I am going.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

With a smile, I grabbed the canine Youkai by the scruff of his neck and left the unfashionable pension.

Part 9

Our meeting point was in the ruins of Ubasute Village.

Or more accurately, it was the ruins of the dam that had kept the village submerged until recently.

All of the valuable parts such as the hydroelectric turbines had been removed, but the giant concrete construction creating a barrier stretching from one mountain to another was still standing. The local government's finances were in dire straits, so I had to wonder if they were planning to dismantle it over a 10 year period. At the very least, it was never going away as long as they continued claiming it was the national government's responsibility because of national policy.

The inside was a giant labyrinth.

It had originally been designed simply to hold the necessary equipment in the necessary places, so the passageways twisted all about as they weaved their way through gaps between that equipment. Also, any maps of the facility had been made unnecessarily complex to prevent any possible terrorist attacks.

Lastly, a concrete mass like a dam had no windows.

As it no longer received power, it was pitch black year round inside.

But bringing a flashlight would have been about the stupidest thing I could have done. The light would have told everyone else where I was so they could concentrate their gunfire on me.

I also refused to rely on my night vision like I was a Sengoku period ninja.

In these cases, it was best to simply rely on technology. In this case, a night vision device. Such devices do not require much explanation, but you could get them without having to pay ridiculous prices on an online auction.

Modern digital cameras and video cameras came with low-light compensation abilities. If you had the knowledge to mess with the firmware a bit, you could overwrite the ranges for the light amplification and give it abilities similar to a night vision device.

You also had to break the backlight for the LCD display and look directly through the viewfinder, but you saved enough money for it to be worth that small bit of trouble.

While I had that 15,000 yen bargain item hanging from my neck, the Sunekosuri trembled down at my feet.

“U-um, what am I supposed to do?”

“Help me.”

“I cannot fight! I am not a deadly Youkai!”

“A Youkai can’t be killed by normal means. If it comes to it, take some bullets for me.”

“I’m way too small to cover for you!!”

We walked through the dam as we spoke.

After a while, something seemed out of place.

Was it a noise? No, it was the flow of the air. Or more accurately, it was breathing. Someone was hiding in the darkness. But it did not seem they were about to spring a surprise attack.

“It seems you know enough to remain in a position where you won’t be hit if someone shoots at you.”

They were hiding behind some machinery.

Perhaps in response to my voice, a powerful light activated in front of me. It was likely a military LED light. It was the type meant to blind someone more than act as illumination. Thanks to that, I could not make out any details about the person on the other side of the light.

Not that I needed to know.

My job was not to splendidly find out the name of the true mastermind. It was to bring a swift end to the incident. If I needed the name to do so, I would thoroughly research it, but I did not need to more often than not. As long as I eliminated the person at the root of it all, the problem could be resolved.

The person holding the light in the darkness said, “I know who you are.”

“And I don’t even know your name.”

“You are Hyakki Yakou’s Deadly Dragon Princess. I am sure of it.”

“That isn’t my name; it’s my Shikigami’s name.”

I also didn’t belong to Hyakki Yakou. I may have had the backing of the young lady, but I really wish they would not be so damn confident in their error.

At any rate, it was now my turn.

“You certainly took care of things in a showy fashion.”

“…To be honest, we messed up,” said the sponsor with some bitterness in his voice.

His breathing is erratic. …Has he lost a lot of blood?

“We rushed things. We should have waited a bit longer. It was only by making enemies of them that we truly saw what results they had gotten. If we had continued to cooperate with them, we could have gotten those for ourselves.”

“You mean the spiritual medicine emulators? Those altered animal mummies?”

“If they had not been near success, we would not have lost so many men.”

Interesting.

It must have been a clash between standard firepower and those spiritual medicines. The sponsor must have been saved by the fact that Saishi Kajin had so few of their prototype versions.

No, the sponsor would have been destroyed even then.

If you had spiritual weapons that could directly alter natural and physical laws, it did not matter how many soldiers you had. Most likely, the prototype spiritual medicines had not been up to the desired specs. Otherwise, the sponsor would never have survived.

“Was that also why the disposal of the bodies was so sloppy?”

“We did not have the time or manpower to do it properly. Frankly, we were lucky only those were found.”

“And that leads you to need my services. I can throw the police investigation of your trail, help you escape overseas, or completely change your identities. Choose whichever course you like.”

“That is certainly a trap.”

“So you came charging in knowing it was a trap?”

“If we ran away here, we would lose any chance to make contact with you. And then we would be unable to kill you.”

I heard a small bit of static.

It was likely a signal being sent over the radio.

“Are you sure a radio signal can travel through this thick dam?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course it can.”

“Well, even if it can, there’s no one to respond to it.”

I casually knocked on a nearby wall.

Or more accurately, I knocked on a row of lockers for dam workers lined up along the wall. The light shock was enough to open the locker door. Something heavy came tumbling out.

I almost thought I heard someone’s throat audibly go dry.

Also, the Sunekosuri actually seemed more surprised than the man holding the light, but the canine Youkai should have realized what was going on when I suspiciously went for a walk before heading into the dam with him.

It was now time to put some pressure on the man.

“If this is your idea of a trump card, I can see why you had trouble with Saishi Kajin. That is much too weak to get by in the underground world.”

“It can’t be…”

“Oh, and don’t think this is the only corpse. If you recall, I never said this was my first time in the dam. It’s only natural to go over a meeting place ahead of time to look for traps. How much beforehand you do it is a matter of personal preference though.”

“Heh heh. I suppose I cannot complain.”

“Yes, you *did* come in beforehand to hide troops.”

“But you have actually saved me some time. You have simply done ahead of time what I was planning to order my troops to do.”

“?”

“I was planning to have them die so I could see the true power of the Deadly Dragon Princess.”

“…You are a horrible person. Also, that isn’t my name; it’s my Shikigami’s name.”

“Everything up until now was done without producing a single scream or gunshot. That is simply not something you can pull off with nothing but a blade or a rope. The paranormal is clearly involved. And it is something powerful enough to earn you the name of the Deadly Dragon Princess.”

“Again, that’s my Shikigami’s…oh, who cares. So what conclusion have you arrived at?”

“That you are not the type of person to rely on guns. You rely on the paranormal when something happens.”

“Well, it is true that I have 80% lost if I have to bring out a gun.”

“Yes. This paranormal that you use, this Deadly Dragon Princess, is obviously stronger than a gun. If you have to rely on a gun, that means you cannot use your more convenient Deadly Dragon Princess for some reason. And that fact means I am in luck.”

“How? You know nothing about the details of my power.”

“I do not need to. *My victory is assured by the mere fact that you are using some type of paranormal power.*”

I heard what sounded like a small bell.

I could not see the man due to the powerful LED light, but he must have pulled out some kind of tool.

“If you recall, we crushed Saishi Kajin. And they had gained a certain level of results with the emulators they produced.”

"Are you trying to use some kind of spiritual medicine? If so, you should have scattered them around beforehand. What if you are taken out before the effects manifest themselves?"

"No," the figure sounded like he was smiling. "The current research was into creating effective emulators by manipulating animal corpses, but what do you think we did at the initial stages to produce these spiritual medicines?"

"…You don't mean…"

"We chopped Youkai to pieces to test what kind of effects they had. How were we supposed to create imitations if we knew nothing about the real deal? Surely you understand what that means. It means the people of Ubasute Village had another useful skill in addition to the spiritual medicines."

I immediately used the heel of my shoe to kick the Sunekosuri at my feet directly backwards.

And then…

"Namely, a surefire method of killing Youkai."

A great noise as if from a large drum burst out.

That was all.

Due to the bright flashlight, I could not tell what exactly was happening.

But I felt an unpleasant feeling coming from the pocket of my hot pants. I pulled out what was in the pocket and clicked my tongue. The doll made out of a wooden charm was falling to pieces.

That meant…

"I did not simply destroy the medium. It is merely that the damage to the Deadly Dragon Princess was transmitted to the medium. In other words, you can no longer use your Deadly Dragon Princess. You have lost the power that made you special."

"…"

"I'm surprised that you could twist Otohime of Ryuuguu Jou that much. You focused on the point of her being the one who is comfortably submerged at the bottom of the sea so the attacks are primarily in the form of drowning. Is the wooden charm supposed to be Urashima? I suppose you use it to draw up the princess wherever you want despite her lack of ill will."

At any rate, it seemed my Shikigami really had been damaged. And even if it had not, the loss of the medium used to call it in was the same thing in the short run. You can't catch a fish without any bait. The fish would not come out of the water on their own. I could no longer invite the Deadly Dragon Princess to the battlefield.

Dammit.

After all this! After all this! After all this! After all this!!

Why did you have to bring about such a horrible, pain-in-the-ass problem!?

"I suppose it is time."

The figure must have been absolutely sure he had robbed me of my last trump card because he began casually walking down the passageway toward me. He circled around the piece of machinery I had been using as cover.

"You are now nothing but a normal human. It is time for you to die from one extra bullet."

He fired without hesitation.

Part 10

I was often referred to as the Deadly Dragon Princess.

That was actually the name of my Shikigami, but people insisted on using it to refer to me no matter how many times I corrected them.

Admittedly, it *was* the symbol of my power and was a catchy nickname that spread easily.

It was my name. It was a symbol that referred to my body.

It was something I could not lose. It clearly supported my very existence. It gave me the power I needed to survive in that underground world. It was essential.

However…

"…Ow, that hurt."

"!?"

The sponsor seemed truly shocked when he suddenly heard me speak. It seemed he was still mistaken about something and I could easily finish him off while he was still mistaken, but I decided against it. I decided to add to his fear instead.

He had destroyed the Deadly Dragon Princess after all. Anyone would be pissed if someone gave you another annoying task you had to carry out.

"No, no. It wasn't getting hit by a bullet that hurt. I just hurt my leg a bit when I jumped to the side. I guess warming-up exercises really are as important as they say. This pain isn't going to let me forget that."

"What…?"

"No, no. Once an attack fails once, trying it again isn't going to help. You aren't going to hit me at that range even if you fire wildly."

"What!? But I took away the power that made you special!! I took away the Deadly Dragon Princess!!"

Repeated gunshots rang out.

But that was all.

None of them hit. There was no way they would hit. If I could not endure this level of mayhem, there was no way I could survive in the underground world and there was no way I would be able to work on my own and take jobs from Hyakki Yakou.

It was said those who met me would die.

I had to wonder if some people really understood what that meant.

“What is going on? Did the Deadly Dragon Princess escape unharmed!?”

I heard what sounded like a small bell. It must have been that same anti-Youkai weapon. But I could only shake my head. If he was still afraid of the Deadly Dragon Princess at this stage, he was mistaken about something at a very fundamental level. Also, the Sunekosuri would be in trouble if he used that weapon too much.

“No. Unfortunately, the Deadly Dragon Princess was indeed damaged. That’s why I’m so pissed.”

“Then!! Then how are you-…!?”

“The Shikigami is indeed useful. It is the source of my power. But I do not use it in the way you seem to think. I did not put it together in order to have it bring about strange phenomena. Do you understand?” I asked. I had a feeling the figure was shaking his head beyond the light. “Hyakki Yakou is an organization created to overturn the accepted idea that Youkai cannot be controlled by human means. I take jobs from them, and I work towards similar ideals as them. Simply put, we work to overcome the fear of Youkai.”

“But…but!! But that’s why you drew power from the Deadly Dragon Princess, right!?”

“That is not the only way to overcome them.” I clenched my right hand and then opened it again. “You can punch them with a human hand. Think for a second about what kind of specs you would need to defeat a Youkai with a punch. You thoroughly modify, develop, and rebuild the human body to gain those specs. Isn’t that a different form of overcoming them?”

……

Oh, dear.

It appeared the truth I had told him had been so far outside the sponsor's realm of thinking that his thoughts stopped for a few seconds. But that did not matter. I continued with my fun.

"The Deadly Dragon Princess that you destroyed was prepared as a model case. It was a hypothetical enemy prepared under the assumption that I could deal with most any situation as long as I could defeat it. I needed to thoroughly modify my own body so that I could defeat the Deadly Dragon Princess with nothing but my own body. Do you understand now that I am not someone who will be killed by a mere bullet?"

That was why I had 80% lost if I had to rely on a gun and had 100% lost if I had to directly rely on the Deadly Dragon Princess. After all, I would have to have been brought down to a hopeless condition if I had to rely on that paranormal power that was clearly weaker than myself.

"You're insane…" muttered the figure.

Instead of asking how I had done it, he immediately jumped to my motive for doing so.

If that was his idea of a final resistance, he was more pathetic than I had thought.

"You're insane!! You're completely insane!! You gave yourself a body stronger than Youkai in order to overcome Youkai? That…that isn't overcoming them at all! That's just making yourself an even greater monster than the Youkai!! You're just making the darkness even greater!!"

"True. Humans too are a type of monster. Hadn't you heard?"

I cracked my neck and then slowly approached the fool who had entered the darkness with nothing but a flashlight.

The sponsor tried to step backwards as if he had finally realized the danger, but it was too late.

"Now, then. I am stronger than the Deadly Dragon Princess. I am designed to be, so that is a definite fact. So what can you do against a monster like that?"

He was already within the darkness.

He had not merely taken on step in; he was already being completely swallowed up.

Part 11

“Excellent work.”

We were in the tea room that was wrapped in such a calm atmosphere you would never think it was within a cutting edge flying wing aircraft. A kimono-wearing girl of about 10 spoke in a flowing voice.

“We have found data on the composition of Sashi Kajin from the sponsor’s cell phones and computers. The men I sent out to investigate have confirmed that every member is dead. There are still many questions left before we can call this truly resolved, but the original objective has been achieved. Due to your results, we shall overlook your methods.”

“Why thank you.”

I would bow my head down to anyone if they would give me what I wanted, but this had been a bit too expensive.

For one thing, the Deadly Dragon Princes had been almost completely destroyed.

And even if that had been an absolutely necessary expense for finishing the job, I could not stand that it had been done by some crazy person who showed up out of nowhere. If only I had just killed him along with the rest at the beginning rather than speaking to him in case there was someone else behind it all.

“Once you have confirmed receipt of your pay, are you willing to take on another job?”

“I’ll need a bit of a long break first. I need to do something to fix the Deadly Dragon Princess after it had its form destroyed.”

“I thought that was just a hypothetical enemy you needed for the design phase? I do not see why you would need it now that you have built yourself up.”

“I need it to perform periodic maintenance. If I just did it by feel, I would end up with things way out of order before long.”

“Fine then. It is not an urgent job. I can wait 2 weeks. If you think you will need longer than that, I will give the job to someone else."

"Also, can I borrow that Sunekosuri?"

"As another hypothetical enemy?"

The small head of Hyakki Yakou looked confused. If possible, I wanted to borrow that young lady as well. That would have made for the best vacation ever.

"By the way," said the young lady when I began to leave. "About the sponsor who eliminated the producers of the spiritual medicines. You have left out any information on the anti-Youkai weapon he had."

"I went a bit nuts in that dam. It was broken during the fight."

"…"

That was a weapon that could kill any Youkai with a single strike.

Hyakki Yakou was constantly fighting with the especially dangerous examples of deadly Youkai, so they would want a weapon like that more than anything else.

But…

"I see. Never mind then."

"You gave up on that easily."

"And you broke it rather easily."

Chehh. She saw right through me. That was the "thing that must not see the light of day" that made the demolition of the dam and the restoration of the village such a problem, wasn't it?

She may have still been the same cute, innocent little girl, but she had grown some.

It made me a little sad.

With that thought, I left the tea room.

After all, it was not our goal to eradicate every single Youkai including the ones like that Sunekosuri.

If she kept something like that around, it would cause unnecessary conflicts with groups in favor of utter eradication that would try to steal it.

Notes

1. ↑ Sunekosuri literally means “shin rubber”.
2. ↑ Paizuri literally means “tit rub” and is also the Japanese term for a “tit job”.
3. ↑ Matakosuri literally means “thigh rubber”.
4. ↑ Saishi Kajin is a Japanese phrase that roughly means “an intelligent man and a beautiful woman”.
5. ↑ A dozou is an old fashioned type of Japanese storehouse.
6. ↑ Katatagae (literally meaning “different direction”) was the Onmyouji practice of divining the fortune of the direction one was going to take when heading out. If the direction was determined to have ill fortune, a different direction would be taken.

Chapter 4: Regarding the Slaughter

Part 1 (Jinnai Shinobu)

It was all over.

It was utterly and fundamentally over. There was not even the slightest hope. After all, there had never before been the slightest hint that someone like her would die!!

“U-uhh…”

The urge to vomit rose up within me. The extreme red coloration made me feel dizzy.

Even so, I could not tear my eyes away from what lay before me. They were rooted to the spot. I pointlessly tried to not make the connection between the thick smell of rusted iron and the fact that I was in the same area as a corpse.

It was in front of me.

A neck that was twisted like an old rag. A female body missing a head. I recognized that person who even now had fresh blood gushing out of her. The corpse had its face crushed and was overall melted, so it was possible it was not actually her. However, that theory did not hold here. I simply recognized too many things about her.

I recognized the beautifully manicured fingers.

I recognized the smooth line of her back.

It matched the memories in my mind so perfectly I shuddered. I could not help but shudder. She was collapsed there limply…no, her entire body was twitching as the blood flowed out like a frog leg with electrodes attached.

I managed to squeeze a voice out of the depths of my dry throat.

“Hishigami…Mai-san…?”

I may have called her name because I was hoping for a response.

Even though she had no mouth. Even though she had no head.

My legs almost collapsed underneath me, but then I realized the redness gushing out was flowing toward me. When I thought it would touch me and sully me, strength reentered my legs. And then I realized something else. I felt it would sully me because it was coming from a corpse. I no longer even thought of it as being Hishigami Mai.

And with that realization, the fear that had been numbed over by the shock came flooding in all at once.

“Ah…ah…aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

I would be killed.

I would be killed if I stayed there. This was a situation where a human on her level had been easily decapitated. A normal high school student like me did not stand a chance!!

I swung my arms around and ran away.

I had no idea what I was screaming. It didn’t matter what. I needed to get out. I needed to get out of the building. I ran through a long passageway.

But I stopped partway through.

My legs refused to move any further.

A single door lay before me. It was half open and a pure red color was splattered on the other side.

Dammit! What the hell!? Dammit!! That’s my uncle! He’s supposed to be a policeman! The symbol of this country’s power! Why…Why is his neck caught in a broken window frame and his legs severed!?

He was my relative, so I did not know whether I should run over crying even though he was so horribly damaged. But the fear held me back. I could not approach. There was something wrong about the situation. He had not died due to blood loss from his legs. He had suffocated with his neck caught in the window frame. It was clear someone had wanted him to slowly suffer as he died by setting a trap he could have escaped had he been able to use his legs at all.

That mystery-loving girl had been thrown on top of a gas burner in the kitchen and Madoka was swaying back and forth as she hung like a chandelier from the ceiling by a giant fishing hook meant for catching Pacific bluefin tuna. There was simply no hope. It did not matter who had done it. I could not imagine how this could all be summarized into an individual pursuing us. It simply seemed to me that the entire hotel was enveloped by some invisible power like some massive malice or grudge.

I was going to die.

I was definitely going to die.

I could not stop my erratic breathing. I could not put together a plan. I was next. In fact, I was the only one left. So who had done this? Was there any way I could escape? In fact…

In fact…

How?

How had it ended up like this?

Part 2 (Jinnai Shinobu)

As I was eating a popsicle on the porch of our Japanese house with a thatch roof that was only any use in the winter, my overall small granny called out to me.

“Shinobu. Shinobu.”

“What is it, granny.”

“It’s a stray cat. I do not mind if it rests here, but I do not want it to start using our yard as its litter box. I tried to chase it away, but it didn’t do any good. Shinobu, could you do something about it?”

“…Granny. That isn’t a cat. It’s a Nekomata. It has two tails. Those things can be deadly, so be careful.”

Cat Youkai were not all that disliked as they were said to take vengeance for their masters, but those were romanticized tales. They had the power to kill people, so you really did have to be careful.

I put on my flip-flops and headed out to the large yard. I then cautiously approached the Nekomata that was curled up below a tree covered in rhinoceros beetles.

“Nekomata, what are you doing here?”

“Can’t you tell? Doing my best to put up with this midsummer heat. I suppose you humans wouldn’t understand with your year-round air conditioning.”

“You can cool down inside if you want, but please don’t use our yard as a litter box.”

“A lady like me would never do something like that. Anyway, that sounds nice. I was starting to feel a bit irritable, so a nice cold bath would be great. Once my mood has been refreshed, I will no longer have to worry about harming anyone.”

“You like baths? But you’re a cat.”

“I am a Nekomata.”

And so I headed for the bath with the Nekomata in my arms.

“This is quite the high-tech bath for such a rundown house.”

“My grandfather insisted we get it redone while we can because he says the house could be designated cultural property at any time. That’s why the kitchen, bathrooms, bath, heating, and cooling are all more advanced than everything else.”

I turned the faucet and cold water started filling the wash basin, but the Nekomata began to complain.

“It will be too cold with just that. Add in some hot water.”

“You sure are picky.”

“That’s too much hot water. It can’t be lukewarm. I want this to be refreshing.”

“Fine, fine,” I replied and stuck the Nekomata in the wash basin.

Despite all her complaints, she seemed to enjoy it. I could hear a lot of purring.

Suddenly, I noticed a flat-chested Yuki Onna peering in through the gap next to the sliding door to the bath. My dad had allowed her to live with us as long as she stayed away from anything related to brewing as the temperature for that had to be precisely controlled. (Incidentally, my mother just generally loved Youkai.)

“…No fair…”

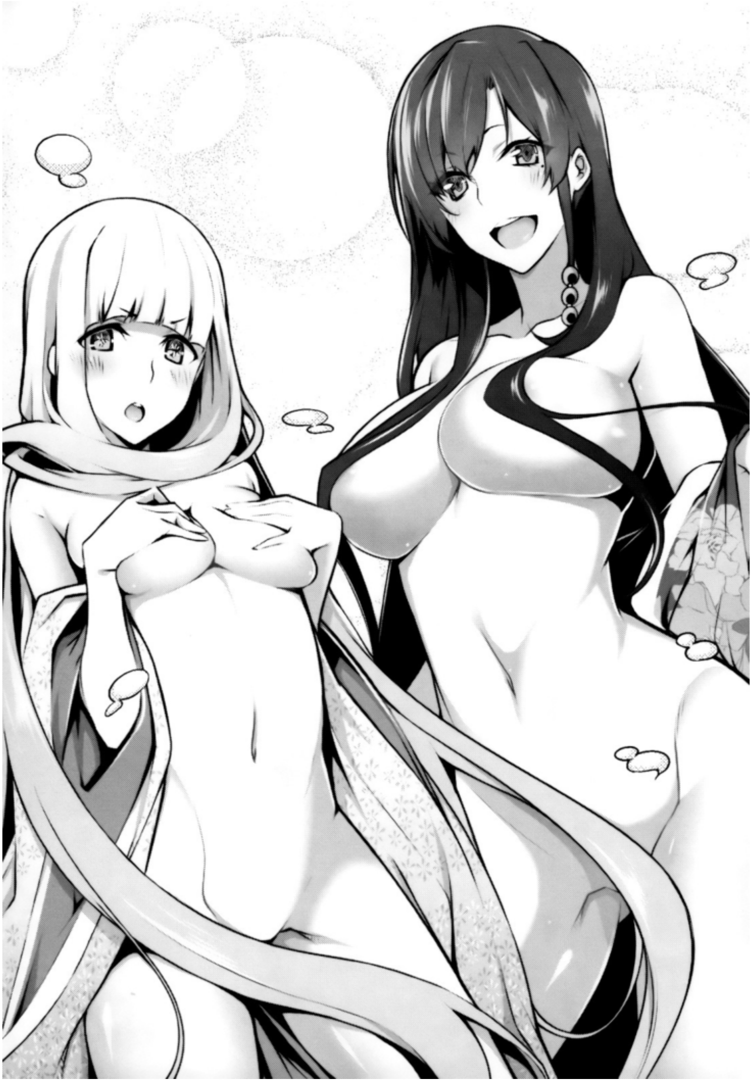
“What isn’t fair?”

“That Youkai suddenly appears and you are already taking a bath with her? And yet I have not received an opportunity like that after all this work I put into solidifying a foundation…”

“Oh, you’re jealous. Not only is that unsightly, but you are way off the mark there,” commented the Nekomata.

“What!? Wait, does this even count? I mean, she’s a cat!!” I said.

“I am a Nekomata. I am as much a deadly Youkai as she is.”



Even if you're in the same category, there's still a huge difference!! And why is Yuki Onna-chan reaching for the obi to her kimono!? You're clearly choosing the wrong person to compete with here!! Are you planning to stick your ass in the wash basin!?

And then came the glamorous Zashiki Warashi. She must have caught scent of my misfortune. The huge grin on her face made it obvious at a glance what she was after. It was a little unclear what this had to do with her being a Zashiki Warashi, but I was past caring.

"Hey, Zashiki Warashi! Hold that Yuki Onna back!"

“No fair, no fair☆”

“Why the hell are you reaching for your yukata’s obi!? Don’t strip nude just for a joke! It isn’t funny when you have a body as nice as that!!”

Part 3 (Hishigami Mai)

The countryside could be annoying with all the Youkai, but big cities were hardly perfect. They were so crowded and filled with unhealthy exhaust and chemicals despite the area being thoroughly altered for humans to live in. I could only imagine the people there enjoyed shaving away their own lifespan.

I entered a chain café and a police detective with a glum look on his face waved me over to a seat in the back. What he was doing counted as work, so I could only be jealous of how easy public servants had it.

Even so, he did seem a bit stiff in his movements due to the wounds from repeated shots from a hunting rifle.

But by “our” standards, that didn’t even count as being injured. Also, he received medical care paid for with the people’s tax money, so I still say they have it pretty easy.

“What are you drinking?”

“What does it matter? By the way…what’s with that outfit? A tank top and hot pants? Did you forget how old you are? You look like a complete idiot. You look like a university student that carelessly got in with a specialized entrance exam and then couldn’t keep up with the classes.”

“If a real idiot wore this, there would be no helping them, but it works as a handy bit of camouflage for those who aren’t idiots.”

“I see. So what did you want to talk about? Let’s get this over with quickly.”

“Oh, c’mon. At least let me complain about my troubles to you. I’ve had some pain-in-the-ass people set their sights on me lately which isn’t any fun. Oh, I know. Could you maybe help smooth things out with them?”

“With you, it’s bound to be your own damn fault. I hate that I can’t arrest someone like you. There are just too many holes in the police organization. So who has their sights on you? The PSIA?”

“MI6. The CIA. Oh, and the European Security Force.”

“That’s clearly well beyond what the Japanese police can deal with!! What the hell did you do!? No, wait…no!!”

“You wanna know? You do, don’t you? Well, I heard a system for making use of Succubi had been established in Europe, so I decided to go take a peek. The system was so poorly made it looked like an idiot had designed it. In fact, the officials who had contacted the Succubus were the ones being contr-…”

“Stop!! Please stop! I don’t want to end up being some poor victim after hearing something I shouldn’t have!!”

Oh, c’mon.

And I was just getting to the good part.

“Why do you two sisters always destroy the boundaries of common sense…?”

“Oh? I’ll admit I may do that, but I thought my little sister was a bit more normal.”

“What is normal about a minor that shows up at the crime scene of every mysterious murder? I’ve had a flood of complaints from the Lifestyle Safety Division. They keep telling me not to let a child see those things and to solve the cases on my own. …I don’t know how word of it reached them, but I’ve even received complaints from the riot police.”

“Why don’t you just go ahead and marry her?”

“Are you completely unfamiliar with the concept of context!? And do you have any idea what Japanese law is!?”

“Oh, right. About that sister of mine.”

“Again, context please…”

“She says to take a week of paid vacation starting today.”

“Why!? I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about!”

Well, that one wasn’t too surprising. My sister knew that was asking too much of him. That was why she had used me as an intermediary for the message.

“I have some tickets here. One for me, one for you, and one for my sister. That’s three in total. These tickets give us free lodging at a hotel in Fuuka Village, an Intellectual Village. You are headed there right away. Understand?”

“…I’ll keep this short. What happens if I just ignore you?”

“I will render you unconscious with this wet towel and stuff you in my travel bag. But then you won’t be able to call in to take a paid vacation, so you might lose your job.”

Part 4 (Jinnai Shinobu)

After dealing with the trouble in the bath, I retreated back to my room.

The air conditioner was running full blast within the room and for some reason the futon was spread out with the Zashiki Warashi lying in it.

“…What are you doing?”

“Don’t you think it’s unfair?” The Zashiki Warashi looked at me with a completely composed expression. “You caught a cold the other day, Shinobu. And who was it that nursed you back to health? For the most part, me. It’s not fair. It’s not fair at all. Don’t you think it’s unfair if you do not treat me kindly after I treated you so kindly?”

“…But you seemed happy enough wringing out the wet towel. I thought I might as well take you up on your offer.”

“You’re always so disagreeable, but you get so obedient when you’re sick. It’s like you revert to being a small child when you feel weak. I kind of like it. I’m starting to wish you had a cold year round. Heh heh… Heh heh heh heh heh.”

Don’t tell me this Youkai that is supposed to bring fortune to my household is always lazing around in an attempt to weaken me.

“But this is a completely different issue. To make things fair, you need to pay me back for my kindness. I want you to nurse me back to health too.”

“…You just thought the porridge you fed me looked good, didn’t you? And Youkai are damn hard to kill, so I doubt you can even catch a cold.”

“Oh, I didn’t overlook that. If you will recall, I took off my clothes and took a cold bath just a bit ago.”

“Eh!? You mean that was meant to be foreshadowing!?”

I decided it was best to play along, so I went to get a towel and a wash bath filled with water.

From inside the futon, the Zashiki Warashi said, “I want to eat some vanilla ice cream.”

“You seem healthy enough to me.”

“Blow on it for me.”

“That’s not how that works. That’s for hot foods.”

The Zashiki Warashi stubbornly refused to sit up, so I had to lift up and support her upper body while I carried the spoonful of dairy product to her mouth.

I had already finished my summer homework and had nothing else to do, so I didn’t really care. I just hoped the Yuki Onna wasn’t watching me with an odd look in her eyes again.

For some reason, the Zashiki Warashi turned the TV to an educational program.

She then said, “I think I’ll grow sick of this after half an hour.”

“I thought you might.”

“But since you seem to want to nurse me back to health so much, I’ll stick with it for the rest of the day.”

“And that’s not how being tsundere works.”

Then my beaten-up old cell phone with a broken camera lens started to ring.

The Zashiki Warashi looked a bit annoyed, but I had to give the phone priority.

It was from Madoka-san, my strange beauty of a classmate who lived in the Sanatorium.

“Shinobu-kun, let’s head to a hotel.”

“What is it, Madoka? Have your morals completely crumbled?”

“Ah ha ha ha ha. Sorry, but a whole group is going. I have an extra ticket, so I was wondering if you wanted to come along.”

…No, I think this is a pretty big deal even so. Are you sure they haven’t crumbled? Well, maybe she’s just taking the idea of the “student summer

break" too lightly.

And on a different note, when did Madoka and I get so close???

"Where is this hotel? The beach? The mountains?"

"Somewhere far away."

"Good enough for me. I'll go convince my parents, so tell me where to meet you and when."

I jotted down the necessary information and hung up. Convincing my parents…well, I doubted it would be easy, but I had to try. After all, this was a student summer break. I could feel unnecessary power welling up within me.

And then I noticed the Zashiki Warashi looking up at me from the futon like she wanted to say something.

"No fair."

"What?"

"Shinobu, you still have a lot to learn about fairness. And so I want to go too."

"I think she said she only had one extra ticket. And with a bourgeois like Madoka, I'm betting adding on an additional ticket would be ridiculously expensive."

"Are you forgetting that Youkai are traditionally treated a lot like humans but there is no legal basis for that treatment?"

"I don't follow."

"I can stay there for free if you insist that I am your pet."

…Doesn't…the idea of being treated like that…make you sad?

I felt an intense urge to comment on that, but that Zashiki Warashi was probably just bored. The lead-in to the cold bath and nursing her back to health had been pretty forced. She obviously just wanted something exciting to happen.

But they said bad things would happen if a Zashiki Warashi abandoned your house. I decided it would be best to have her let off some steam before she truly got sick of our house and went off on some journey.

Part 5 (Kotemitsu Madoka)

I am the kind of person that does not believe in any of those ideas that says the fate of the entire planet has already been decided by Nostradamus, the Mayans, the Aztecs, or any other prophecies.

However, I do believe in small, fleeting bits of luck. In fact, anyone who has not felt something like that by their teenage years has already lost in some way. They will likely never make anything of themselves.

This is Madoka-san telling you this and I have around 30 billion Japanese yen, so you can trust me.

But even so, those small, fleeting bits of luck are usually something you cannot affect under your own power. Teenagers have a tendency to believe that the outcome of any sort of competition they are in is dependent on their own talent, effort, ideas, or some brilliant move of theirs, but they are wrong about that. Humans are complexly interrelated with others simply by being alive. And I am not trying to be reassuring when I say that. More often than not, that interrelation is a negative thing.

Learning to understand how others feel is not just some nice thing to do; it is the one and only secret technique to acquiring certain victory. There's some famous quote about knowing your enemies and knowing yourself, but that is not quite accurate. What you need to know is the general flow of opinions and ideas whether they belong to your enemies, your allies, or even complete strangers.

Complete strangers will often affect the outcome without you even knowing it.

And so…

I am surrounded almost entirely by people that trip others up, people that grow envious of others, and people that rampage around based on nonsensical resentment or imagined victimhood. That is why I end up treating the rare innocent and good people like they are exceptionally precious.

"…Heh heh heh. Heh heh heh heh heh. You mustn't underestimate a problem child, class president. To you, I may just be one address among your triple digit total of addresses, but to me, you are a highly valued comrade among my single digit total of addresses. Heh heh heh heh heh heh heh."

"Madoka, you're turning into the kind of pervert that only geniuses are allowed to be, so be careful."

Whoops.

I was frightening Enbi who I had been speaking to over the phone.

Even after moving from the city, she had remained one of those few "innocent and good" people.

"So this trip is to an Intellectual Village called Fuuka Village?" I asked.

"Right, right. It's centered around dairy farming, so it should be a wide open area. And it's full of events that let you come into contact with animals."

"I hear the cows and horses have their health more strictly managed than someone in a fitness club's weight control program."

But putting aside that idyllic vision (the residents of Intellectual Villages had digital values for things like "tranquility"), I was a bit worried since that mystery freak was so intent on going. Unfortunately, I knew that anything she was interested in had to do with human death.

Even so, she was still "innocent and good", so it did not go so far as needing to actively avoid her.

"Enbi, there is one thing I need to know before we go. There are no well-known legends that have been told about Fuuka Village since the Edo period, are there?"

"Did you manage to find someone for that extra ticket?"

"There aren't mysterious serial murders at set intervals, are there? The inn isn't owned by a beautiful widow, is it? Office ladies don't have a habit of heading to the hot springs in groups, do they?"

"And here I was worried that you wouldn't be able to find any friends that are 'more than friends' after transferring away, Madoka."

Part 6 (Jinnai Shinobu)

The day of the trip finally came.

One of the numerous downsides of an Intellectual Village was the relative lack of public transportation connecting to the outside world. This meant everyone heading out on a trip would naturally end up at the same station at the same time.

If I called it a train that never saw rush hour, people might imagine a vehicle of the bourgeoisie, but it was actually just a local line. Even if you counted the up and down tracks separately, the train only made 5 trips each day. …It seemed completely insane and I saw no way they could make a profit off of it.

By the time I arrived, the healthy and well-behaved Madoka-chan was wearing a white dress and an elegant hat. She was looking 150% as ephemeral as ever and sitting on a bench in the empty station (the station was not operated by robots or anything). When she spotted me and the Zashiki Warashi next to me, her eyes opened wide.

“I see someone with large breasts that I did not invite.’

“She’s my pet. She can wear a collar with a bell on it if it means she stays for free.”

“…Shinobu-kun. When did you get such full-fledged perverted tastes?”

“Don’t look at me. She’s the pervert that suggested it.”

Hmm. Come to think of it, I might be willing to wear a collar if it would save me a few hundred thousand yen.

“And let me be clear. I worked hard to keep the destruction of common sense contained to this level. All last night, I had to put up with a Yuki Onna and Nekomata shouting about how unfair this is.”

I had finally won out by saying it would be hard to bring deadly Youkai belonging to our house out of the Intellectual Village. The issue was a bit different for stray (?) ones as they could come and go as they please, but it had still worked. I had a sinking feeling that meant that Nekomata was planning to stay.

Meanwhile, Madoka gave me a puzzled look from the bench.

“(Hmm. In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with the Zashiki Warashi coming, but adding an unexpected irregular character to the cast list is bringing us closer to the kind of situation Enbi likes so much. I hope this trip works out okay.)”

“Hey, Madoka. The train’s about to arrive. If we miss this, we’ll have to wait until nightfall.”

“You’re right. Worrying about it isn’t going to help. (Even if the kind of serial murders that Enbi likes do happen, it doesn’t matter as long as we don’t get wrapped up in them.)”

Madoka seemed to convince herself of something and then headed over to the ticket machine. The station supported the use of IC cards, but neither of us had one. We just bought everything we wanted over the internet, so we did not feel the need to leave the village very often.

I walked past a sign saying “Make sure not to bring in any outside pollen or germs!” and approached a different ticket machine.

The Zashiki Warashi gave a puzzled look while standing next to me.

“I see a kid’s ticket, but I can’t find the pet ticket.”

“…If you keep this joke going, you might end up stuffed inside an airplane’s cargo hold.”

Part 7 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

Honestly, it isn’t normal for a mere police officer to take an entire week off at once. And since I was spending the time on a trip with a girl who always showed up at the scenes of mysterious murders and a woman who could single-handedly resolve cases the police could not handle, I felt like even the bare minimum of professional ethics was crumbling around me.

“We’ve arrived, we’ve arrived. So this is the Intellectual Village known as Fuuka Village. It’s in a large plain just as I expected,” said the mystery freak as she threw her arms up into the air after shoving her travel bag into my arms.

When we left the small regional airport, we found a sight rare in Japan. A vast expanse of green stretched to the horizon, robbing us of any sense of distance. And not a single plant we could see was natural. It was all part of a pasture.

The mystery freak’s older sister shoved her bag into my arms as well and said, “I heard half of the dairy commercials you see are filmed here. It must be specifically designed to be picturesque.”

The regional airport was located right smack in the middle of the large plain, but we were not yet inside the Intellectual Village. We still had to head 20 to 30 kilometers down a road with no traffic lights before we would arrive at the hotel.

Fuuka Village was focused primarily on dairy production, so it was well-equipped in noise-reduction methods.

The area was quite cool for being in the middle of summer, but Enbi was only wearing a two-piece swimsuit, a miniskirt, and a hoodie. Basically, she looked like she belonged on the beach or in a club. Her sister was wearing a tank top and hot pants, so I started to wonder if it was something that ran in the family. But then…

“…No, she has her own issues that can’t be explained by her sister’s influence,” I commented.

“Were you just thinking something very rude about us?”

“Were you just thinking something very rude about us?”

With the two sisters both glaring at me, I averted my gaze as I started sweating a cold sweat.

Enbi pointed up into the sky and said, “I can see a lot of what look like ad balloons.”

“I bet those are cameras. They probably monitor the pasture and the moisture levels. This is a large area. Those UAVs that look like toy planes could do the same job, but they’re expensive, susceptible to strong gusts of wind, and their batteries don’t last long, so they aren’t perfect for everything.”

“The balloons are cheap, but they can’t make tight turns. The balloons might perform a general observation and a UAV is sent out if anything out of the ordinary is detected.”

But that was not what I was interested in.

“Can you finally explain this to me?”

“Explain what?”

“Why you forced me to use my vacation time to come out here. Dealing with just one of you sisters is bad enough, but nothing good can come of having the two of you together. What are you hiding from me?”

“Well, I tried out the neighborhood association lottery and…”

“Mystery freak, with you, that kind of beginning scares me all the more. Really, any kind of trip that has some kind of unnatural beginning scares me with you. What are you after?”

“Can you teach 3 or 4 kids to be proper members of society by the end of the day?”

“Not even a priest could manage that.”

Part 8 (Jinnai Shinobu)

Five hours. Five whole hours.

Even though we took a plane as a shortcut, that’s still way too long for a trip. I only just barely managed to survive thanks to the novelty of being on a plane for the first time, but it was well beyond the limit of what a mere student could withstand.

It was the afternoon by the time we arrived at the hotel.

Its overall coloration was red. That may have been because it was made primarily out of brick. The building was only about 3 stories tall. Its silhouette formed an upside down T-shape. A cylindrical building stood in the center and rectangular buildings stretched out from either side. The rectangular portions…that is, the parts that looked like school buildings were probably where our rooms were located.

“I guess there are a lot of different kinds of Intellectual Villages,” said my “pet” Zashiki Warashi as she looked up at the building.

It certainly was quite different from our thatch roofed house. Intellectual Villages did not try to accurately and faithfully reproduce the scenery from some specific year in history. Instead, they took the vague ideas people had of what a rural town was and dragged those imagined ideas out into reality. For that reason, the time period represented could be very different depending on the region.

“Beef and cow’s milk only really took off during the Meiji period, so they may be going for that format.”

Even so, I doubted what I saw was a faithful recreation of the Meiji period. As I already said, they focused on matching the vague ideas people had about rural areas.

Simply put, that had a way of making a stronger brand image.

As we gave our impressions of the building, Madoka spoke up.

“Let’s get inside.”

“Oh, right.”

"I'm interested whether she passes as a pet or not."

"Personally, I would say 'worried' rather than 'interested'."

After all, what were we supposed to do if it didn't work? The hotel was surrounded by nothing but pastures as far as the eye could see. The only other constructions were gas stations and pay phones. The pastures surrounding the hotel were owned by four different farms and being able to pet the animals was one of the area's draws. However, I had heard that the actual dairy facilities were 20 to 30 kilometers away. The farm workers were only around during the day, so the area would be completely abandoned save the hotel once night fell.

As a dairy Intellectual Village, it had to have thoroughbred bloodline development institutions and refrigerated facilities to preserve the genetic information of the brand-name meat as a countermeasure for infectious disease outbreaks. However, it seemed all of those facilities were located on the outer perimeter of the pastures along with the solar power plant.

"…Well, if that happens, sleeping outside will be the only option," I commented.

"Can you really last an entire week outside, Shinobu?"

"Wait a second!! When did you swipe that ticket from me!?"

With a slight smile, the Zashiki Warashi gave off a silent pressure that told me to do my very best if I wanted to stay in the hotel.

Please, do your job and bring fortune to your household, you damn Youkai!!

The entrance to the hotel was in the cylindrical portion of the upside down T-shape. The exterior was primarily made of red brick, but the interior was mostly white. The walls and ceiling were both white. The floor was covered with a vividly colored carpet.

The counter was located in the back of the relatively small lobby. The wall behind the counter had a simple diagram of the hotel's first floor on it. A worker in black slacks, a button-down shirt, and a vest stood behind the counter. This was the first checkpoint for me. The trip couldn't even begin without succeeding here, so I needed to use all of my power and I kind of wanted some extra support from Madoka-san and her wealth.

However…

“Hey, it’s Madoka. Did you just arrive?”

“Oh, so you did get here ahead of us, Enbi.”

Geh!? She’s already heading away!? And who the hell is that girl who looks like she only just started wearing a bra!?

“Hm? Is that thing over there in the lounge a Sunekosuri?”

“Don’t you run away, too!! We may be in the same boat here, but I was dragged into this! This is primarily about you!!”

Part 9 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

Shinobu was waving his arms around while trying to make some kind of deal with the worker at the lobby counter. He had become quite eccentric since I had last seen him. It really did seem the entire trip was falling apart in some way, but that was not the main issue.

Why?

Why is she here?

Why is that horrible Zashiki Warashi here!?

“Hehh. You don’t often see a Zashiki Warashi just wandering around. And even adults can see her. Will my fortune with money increase if she approaches me?”

Mai sounded carefree enough about it, but I knew this Youkai was not that nice.

A Zashiki Warashi was supposed to bring fortune to a household while also playing childish pranks, but from what I knew of that one, she excelled at the prank side of things. I am not exaggerating when I say about half of my teenage years were completely ruined by her.

I had no idea how she had ended up here, but I knew I had to work to hide my presence as much as possible for the duration of the trip.

“Detective, that Zashiki Warashi is waving at you.”

“Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

I let out a scream that would make you go paler than a snuff video.

Th-that grin. She’s definitely planning something unthinkable again!! I still haven’t forgotten how you ended my first love by cutting away my swimsuit with scissors!!

Mai looked thoroughly irritated as she said, “You really do have talent when it comes to making Youkai hate you. The Sunekosuri hasn’t approached you once this whole time. I wonder if that complete negative reaction could be used in some way.”

"Th-that doesn't happen because I want it to!!"

"It seems that boy who came with the Zashiki Warashi has a different but equally interesting nature, but I suppose it doesn't matter. I just want to go love on that Sunekosuri!!"

"Wait! Don't leave me alone!!"

I tried to grab at her for safety, but the next thing I knew, I was lying collapsed on the ground.

Ahh! The Zashiki Warashi is headed this way out of boredom because Shinobu is focused on convincing that worker!! At this rate, she'll fill the time by destroying everything I need to live a normal life in society!!

"Not good. My only option is to get to my room and hole up there!!"

When I frantically tried to grab my bag, a different hand reached in from the side.

It belonged to one of the hotel's workers.

"I will carry that to your room for you if you like."

"Th-thanks…um…Matsukai-san?"

I had to check the nameplate on the chest of the worker's vest for the name.

Matsukai-san smiled and said, "I am at your service for the short time you are here."

Part 10 (Jinnai Shinobu)

The hotel itself was fairly small, so naturally the room was not that large. Then again, it was a single.

But it was a Western style room, and that got me excited. It wasn't that I had any real complaints with that thatch-roofed house, but it did lack some things.

The Zashiki Warashi approached the window and let out a strange voice that seemed a mixture of admiration and annoyance.

"There really isn't anything as far as the eye can see. The only activity is seeing the animals. Once you get tired of that, you're out of luck, aren't you?"

"I'd say the bigger problem at the moment is why you're in here with me when it's a single."

"I'm being treated as a pet. Of course they aren't going to give me my own room."

"…I still can't believe they went along with that."

It was possible her being a Zashiki Warashi worked to her advantage. Not that she would bring fortune to the hotel or anything.

Now then.

I had managed to feign calmness up to that point, but it was about time for me to do something about my pounding heart. And it really was pounding!! When I accepted the invitation, I had assumed I was on a stable course straight down the Madoka route, but now that was all thrown into chaos by the sudden inclusion of the Indoor Youkai option. And really, no matter if anything actually happened or not, it would pretty much be a scandal for any public figure from the moment we entered the room together. The tabloids would be all over it!!

At that moment, the Zashiki Warashi's nose twitched slightly.

"…I sense inappropriate thoughts."

"Don't be silly!! You're just being too self-conscious, you good-for-nothing Zashiki Warashi! If this was made into a book, it would be designated for all ages!!"

"Shinobu."

"It means nothing to me if this room is a single and therefore has just the one bed and I'm alone in it with you and your massive tits, the gentle curve of your back, and the soft curves of your hips!!"

"The device I am about to attach to your fingertip is a polygraph sensor that sends an electric shock depending on your answer, so answer 'true' to every true-or-false question I ask you."

"Ha ha ha. Like you actually have such a convenient-…wait, you do!? Why!? Wah! Wait, wait! I'll confess, I'll confess!! Teenage boys are thinking inappropriate thoughts about 80% of the time!! And doesn't bringing pointless things like that just make your bag heavier!?"

"Do not underestimate modern online teaching materials and sites selling modern security goods. At any rate, Question 1: Your secret savings are hidden below a false bottom in your school bag."

"That question has nothing to do with the situation!!"

"With your fragile mental defenses, I get the feeling your mind would collapse if I got straight to the point."

"I get it, so stop physically attacking me with your words!!"

"Question 2: If possible, you want to have your way with both me and Madoka and your virgin mindset gives you the groundless confidence to imagine we would both come on to you."

"Why would you head straight into it if you know it will destroy my mind!? A-and that's just a mindset! That doesn't mean I actually am one!!"

"…!!"

"Why do you look so shocked? D-do I seem that much like a virgin to you?"

"Y-you aren't lying, are you?"

"If I was, that electrode would send a shock into my finger, right!?

Actually…how much of a shock does it send!? What do you have in that box? It isn't a car battery, is it!?"

"Qu-question 3: It was with Madoka."

"No. She may have a cute face, but she's too much of a bourgeois for me to find an opening. That's why I thought this trip was such a great opportunity."

"Question 4: Yuki Onna?"

"I'd be frozen to death the next morning, if I did that."

"Neko-…"

"It wasn't the Nekomata!! The format is just too different! Explain to me how that would even be possible!!"

Part 11 (Zashiki Warashi - Yukari)

Shinobu started sobbing while lying in the bed, so I had no choice but to leave the room to find something else to do. I had to wonder whether he had actually believed me about the stun gun polygraph. I don't dislike high-tech gadgets, but that doesn't mean I have any idea how to put one together. I can't stand the smell of a soldering iron.

"Mutter mutter… But if Shinobu actually believed that, was he telling the truth when he said that…? Hmm…"

I couldn't believe it.

I simply couldn't believe it.

I didn't particularly care about Shinobu, but I was a bit worried at how low my accuracy had fallen if I had missed something that major about my household as a Zashiki Warashi.

Then again, I had no proof that Shinobu was telling the truth. It was possible Shinobu had seen through my stun gun polygraph bluff and was having his own fun at my expense. I had no real proof one way or the other. It would be foolish to simply take Shinobu's word for it.

Shinobu could be a bit of a show off.

I had no idea if a male version of pseudocyesis existed, but Shinobu certainly had the delusional power to pull it off.

"I need some time to cool down."

When I wanted to have some fun, I would go have some fun.

I wasn't going to find anyone in the hotel hallway, so I headed for the first floor lobby and the adjacent lounge where I was likely to find someone. I was technically considered a pet, so I really shouldn't have been wandering around on my own. However, Shinobu was considered my owner, so he would be the one to get in trouble, not me. Having someone else to take the blame for your actions was a great way to put your mind at ease. In that way, my position as a pet was quite a nice one.

"You are a Zashiki Warashi, aren't you?"

"And you are a Sunekosuri."

"It must be nice. Not only are you beautiful overall, but you are one of the major Youkai. One of you is almost guaranteed to show up in any Youkai manga or Youkai movie."

"Yes, but I do kind of wish I had an animal form. When filming a commercial, they always want a cute kitten or puppy."

"But there is too much inflation in animal Youkai. A deadly one like the Nekomata can act as a mascot while still joining in the battles. And if they want a canine Youkai, they always choose the Inugami. There's nothing left for a Sunekosuri."

I was not so sure.

I had a feeling a mascot only worked when it was completely powerless.

"There is nothing I can do to defeat a Zashiki Warashi when it comes to impact. You're both harmless and look like girls, so there is no more anyone could ask from you. And since you primarily bring fortune you fill the protagonist-side support role perfectly."

"Nothing says a Zashiki Warashi has to be female and we are hardly innocent since we will predict fires. I wonder why the image of the girl Zashiki Warashi is so strong."

"Being cute with a bit of venom hidden below the surface is perfect for entertainment. I am a Sunekosuri. All I do is rub up against shins. There is no room for drama there."

"Didn't the Sunekosuri come about from the fear of something being at your feet while walking along a path at night? Y'know, something like a poisonous snake. I would say that's a much more standard origin than something like me."

"Then I wish I at least had poison as an additional skill. I just rub up against people. The only way that can cause fear is by creeping people out when they think some strange fetishist is following them around."

"Yet you're still coming up and rubbing against my leg."

“…It is a sad instinct,” he said as he continued rubbing and averted his gaze.

Hmm. This isn’t bad. Is it because he looks like a puppy? If I sat down in a luxurious chair and crossed one leg over the other, I would probably be filled with an incredible sense of superiority. Maybe I should try it with Shinobu sometime.

“Sunekosuri, have you gone out into the pastures to see the cows and horses and whatnot?”

“I gave up when the sheep mistook me for a sheepdog and ran away from me. What do you want to do?”

“I would rather eat some beef than see the living cows. Oh, some lamb would be nice too.”

“You can only get away with comments like that because you are a Zashiki Warashi. I’m jealous. With the way I look, people just assume I am a carnivore that wants to eat its prey.”

I continued to speak with the other Youkai for a while.

As the trip had no real objective, I had been prepared for this, but I was still bored all the same.

I was afraid it would be nothing but this until dinner.

I could only hope that Shinobu made a quick recovery.

Part 12 (Hishigami Enbi)

It wasn’t often that I got to enjoy a trip with the detective without anyone getting killed. Normally, I would chase after a murder and just happen to end up at the same crime scene as him, so it was hard to expect your usual love comedy scenes.

I may spend the entire year solving mysteries, but it wasn’t like I could not enjoy anything without a serious atmosphere. Like with everything, you needed a nice balance.

“This is my chance.”

I tossed my bag on the hotel room bed and headed right back out into the hallway. I then realized I had left my smartphone in the room, so I headed back into the room. When I returned to the hallway, I realized I had locked my cardkey in the room.

I used the interphone in the hallway to make my embarrassing confession to the front desk. The worker at the front desk headed up to retrieve my key.

My mind really was useless outside of my specialty. I was brilliant when it came to people’s deaths. And that only applied to deaths that still had some kind of mystery remaining.

My grades on school exams were not all that great and I was always getting flustered and confused as to what to do to make that detective fall for me. If a history question was needed to disarm a bomb, I could answer it immediately. If I had to seduce a man to gain a clue, I could eloquently pull it off as many times as necessary. But once the mode switched over, I was hopeless.

I know it is a problem, but I do not think it is all that rare a thing.

For example, someone who writes a blog post every day cannot write a novel. And someone who is treated as a god for their ability to compose poetry on the streets cannot write bestselling lyrics. It may all be types of “writing”, but a change in genre could change someone’s scores drastically.

The bias in my mental ability was nothing more than that.

And there were times when you had to attempt something even though you knew you were terrible at it.

“…Hmm. If only the hotel had a pool. Then I could easily seduce that detective.”

I had worn a swimsuit with a hoodie and miniskirt, but it had been a failure. If he viewed it as my normal clothes, it no longer seemed special. I had monitored his expression closely, but his perspiration and pupil dilation had been at normal levels. Things were not going well. People had a tendency to grow accustomed to things, but I was unsure how to achieve a greater impact.

I had to come up with a way to break out of that deadlock.

I thought while dashing down the hallway toward the detective’s room.

I gave up trying to come up with something 5 seconds after I began thinking.

“There’s no use in thinking about something you’re terrible at!”

I spotted the detective just as he stepped out of his door, possibly to head to the hotel’s shop. I started running towards him while stretching my arms up into the air and arching my back to put as much of a burden on the chest of my swimsuit as I could. (Mostly by pulling it upwards.)

“Hey there, detective! I’m willing to go as far as a swimsuit wardrobe malfunction!!”

“Are you mocking the Japanese police!?”

Part 13 (Jinnai Shinobu)

Sigh.

I couldn’t believe that damn Zashiki Warashi had brought such a horrible toy with her.

But I could hardly spend all my time sobbing in my room. Staying by myself was just too boring. We were on a trip to a sightseeing spot! I was in a resort hotel with my rich classmate and a huge-breasted Youkai!! And so I took action. I headed off to search for some kind of fun that was full of sleazy desire. In my current mood, I would certainly have tried to peek if the hotel had an open air bath. Unfortunately, it was a western hotel.

“I at least want to hug someone. If I let that be the opening move to set the mood for the trip, things are sure to escalate from there. It will be harder to get anything started in the second half of the trip once the standards have been set.”

I set the initial goal as low as I could to avoid crushing myself under self-created pressure. I opened the door to my room and headed out into the hallway. If I was going to find someone, it would either be in the lobby or the lounge. Or I could call Madoka down by cell phone.

While I was waiting for the elevator, someone exited a room on the same floor.

It was a woman wearing an eye-catching outfit.

There were probably fewer than 30 women in the world who could get away with wearing a tank top and hot pants after 20.

I then recognized who she was.

She had been with my uncle.

She was certainly beautiful, but I had a hard time coming up with a way to start a conversation with someone with as much of a mature aura as she had. Just like a middle school student and a high school student were completely different things, a high school student and a college student were completely different things. I got the feeling that the foundations of our thoughts were completely different. In fact, I felt like I would need a Hollywood celebrity level foundation to even think about approaching someone like her.

The woman must have been bored waiting for the elevator because she pulled out her cell phone.

“Have you been here long? This is my first day, but I’m already wondering what we can possibly do for an entire week after looking around the pastures.”

Betraying all of my expectations, she actually spoke to me.

What? What?

I was happy to have someone as beautiful as her speak to me, but it also scared me a bit.

I couldn’t get a read on her, so I just safely nodded and agreed with her.

“Y-yeah.”

“Do you know if there is a casino somewhere nearby as a bonus stage?”

“I only just got here today, too.”

“I see. I guess I may be stuck just playing with the Sunekosuri. Oh, right. Have you seen this?”

The woman held her cell phone out toward me. The screen showed a low quality home video filmed with a small lens. I felt the urge to point out that there was no way I could have seen it before.

But what was it?

It looked like the back of an old tatami-filled room in Kyoto or something. It looked less like something from an agricultural village like my house and more like something befitting nobility. In the room was a girl of about 10 with black hair and wearing a kimono that looked about as expensive as a foreign car.

The girl did not seem used to being filmed, so she was blushing a deep red and waving her hands in front of her face.

“Hey, stop, hey! I do not particularly mind, but you cannot film inside the facility for security reasons…” said the girl.

"It isn't on," said another voice.

"Eh? Um…really?"

"You're too self-conscious."

"To be honest, I do not understand what you hope to gain by filming me, but I do not mind as long as you do it elsewhere."

"Don't be like that. You know very well this video won't leave this device."

"So you are filming?"

The woman looked very pleased with herself as she shoved the cell phone in my face.

"See?"

???

"Don't you think girls of about that age stimulate your protection instincts the most? They're just so cute. If she was some hairy dirty old man, I would have abandoned them long ago. Then again, I don't think I was that cute even as a kid. Maybe that's why I like them so much."

"I-I see…"

Personally, I was not old enough to think kids were cute. I was more interested in older girls. Each individual part of the girl in the video was fine, but she gave me an overall unsteady appearance because the balance of the parts seemed somehow off. Maybe because she was still in the process of growing. Still, she was definitely better than a baby.

At any rate…

I was more surprised to learn such a young woman had a daughter of about 10.

"Well, it's not like she's actually related to me in any way."

"Then what the hell is that video about!?"

"It's like a good luck charm. When I think about the fact that some kid young enough to call science class 'life environment studies' is desperately trying to hold together an organization, I’m willing to put up with a few unreasonable demands.”

“Eh? Eh???”

With that final incomprehensible comment, the woman got onto the elevator that had arrived.

I watched the elevator leave and then suddenly realized something.

“Wait, I was waiting for the elevator too!!”

Part 14 (Hishigami Mai)

I had a habit of eating dinner early. But then, my life cycle had me eating the equivalent of a late-night snack instead of breakfast. I still had to eat three meals a day, but my job did not exactly allow me to wake up in the morning and go to sleep at night.

This meant I was not eating at the same time as my little sister and the detective, so I was eating alone. Well, it was also my duty as the older sister to not disturb those two. Really, they should just hurry up and get married.

I arrived at the hotel restaurant right when they began serving dinner, so I was the only customer.

The food listed on the menu was quite expensive, but the ticket I was staying with came with free meals. I ordered a light course that featured a rare veal steak. I did not order an alcoholic drink. I did enjoy drinking, but I preferred to do so at a specialty bar. You couldn't just get a bit intoxicated with your dinner. That was like ordering the curry rice at a beachside restaurant and assuming you were suddenly an expert in Indian food.

The food wasn't bad.

It was a small hotel, but it was a sightseeing spot in an Intellectual Village, so it had more workers than necessary. Not only did the ticket eliminate the ridiculously expensive lodging fees and meal expenses, but we did not have to pay their labor costs either.

After finishing off the dessert, I wiped my mouth with my napkin and called over a nearby worker.

"Hey, I have a question."

"What might that be?"

"Is there a newspaper vending machine anywhere around here?"

"If you contact the front desk, you can get a newspaper sent to your room each morning. You can choose from 3 national papers and 2 in English."

"That should do it. Does it cost extra?"

"It is included in the room fee."

"…Then I'd be losing out if I didn't order one."

"Is that all?"

"Oh, right. One more thing. It's not that big a deal, but…Matsukai-san…"

I read the workers name from the nameplate on his chest.

"What is it?"

"Do you mind telling me your full name?"

"*It is Matsukai Hiroshi.*"

"*Oh?*"

So I run across that name here, too. And you didn't even hesitate to tell me. But you see, I killed a scholar with that exact same name just the other day.

Of course, since it had been used as a fake name, it was not that unusual a name. It was possible this was just some poor normal person who just so happened to have the same name.

Or perhaps he was connected with *that* Matsukai Hiroshi and he gave the name so readily so that I would hesitate for that exact reason.

"What an unusual name."

"Is it?"

"It is unusual in this area at least. *That name is an endangered species*."

"I do not see how the two names would be that unusual to see together."

"So," I said quietly with a grin. "Can you see the Deadly Dragon Princess yet?"

"!?"

You idiot. You could at least hide your reaction better than that.

He must have realized his mistake as soon as he made it. He frantically recomposed his expression, but it was too late. It did not matter whether he could see the Deadly Dragon Princess or not. Or rather, I had not even pulled it up from the water using the summoning medium, so there was no way he could see it. What mattered was that he had reacted to the term "Deadly Dragon Princess". He had felt true fear upon hearing it. Any normal person would have simply been confused.

"…"

"…"

I reached for the decorative fork in the center of the table and the man naming himself Matsukai Hiroshi slowly reached around to his back. He had abandoned his "role" without losing the smile.

I could sense no clear killer intent.

The restaurant music playing in the background seemed to fill the atmosphere.

He clearly knew that killer intent would only provide a hint to an enemy if you doubted it would intimidate them.

This was going to be fun.

At the very least, he would likely put up more of a fight than the previous Matsukai-san. If he pulled out a handgun, he would rank at about a B, but I could find myself in a bit of a gamble if he pulled out something a little more interesting. I decided it would be safest to end this with my first move. The only question was whether I could do so with only a knife and fork.

But then…

The atmosphere filling the room was destroyed by a few footsteps coming from the entrance to the restaurant.

Oh, shit. Not good.

Some normal people had arrived…no, they were my little sister's friends. Kotemitsu Madoka, Jinnai Shinobu, and the Zashiki Warashi. Even if I had never spoken with someone, there were plenty of ways to learn their names.

“I’m hungry.”

“Beef. I want to eat some beef on the first day at least.”

“…Aren’t you being a bit merciless after seeing that idyllic scenery?”

Meanwhile. Matsukai Hiroshi-san took a slow step backwards while still smiling and with one hand still reaching around behind him. Using his eyes, he told me to postpone things for the moment.

He assured me we could continue this later.

I see, I see, I see.

So that’s the way you think.

I decided to give him an answer. With a tiny movement the others would not pick up on, I nodded in Matsukai Hiroshi’s direction.

He slowly nodded back and took another step backwards.

In the next instant, I made my move despite the witnesses.

Part 15 (Jinnai Shinobu)

It happened suddenly.

It took me a few seconds to understand what had happened before my eyes.

By the time my mind managed to comprehend the situation, the worker named Matsukai had already been knocked to the ground and had a silver fork stabbed into the side of his neck. It wasn't as dangerous a weapon as a knife or icepick, but it was clearly sticking into a very dangerous place.

"Wh-wha-what!? What the hell are you doing!?"

"Don't get so excited, boy. This has nothing to do with you."

It was only then that I heard the clatter of the chair the woman had been sitting in hitting the floor. Everything from standing up from the chair to finishing the attack had been done in a single motion. She was fast. Overwhelmingly fast. Was she a cheetah or something!?

The woman gave us no further attention and looked down at Matsukai-san who still had the fork stabbing into his neck.

"Okay, Matsukai Hiroshi Mark 2. What are you doing out here in the country? Since you're using that name, I assume you aren't simply constructing a Package. How is Saishi Kajin related to this? In fact, are they still around?"

"…"

"Speak to me. Give me some communication please. I made sure you had enough strength left to do that. If I move my wrist like I'm twirling pasta around the fork, I can rip your nerves and artery to shreds. I am Hishigami Mai. Do you really think you can keep silent in front of me?"

For some reason, Matsukai-san was smiling even while being asked those nonsensical questions. It was possible they were not nonsensical to him.

In the next instant, Matsukai-san's body jerked like he had a high voltage electric current running through him and dark red blood flowed from his mouth.

“D-did you kill him!?”

“He had some means of committing suicide. It wasn’t the almond-smelling method, though.”

The woman clicked her tongue, pulled out the deadly fork, and wrapped a nearby napkin around it. She may have been trying to take the evidence with her. I was completely dumbfounded by the entire situation and could not take my eyes off of Matsukai-san as he lay motionless on the ground.

Could he still be saved?

I saw things like CPR in dramas and movies a lot, but…

“No, don’t even try it. I told you he had a means prepared, didn’t I? If you kiss him now, you’ll just end up with bloody foam coming from your mouth too.”

The situation was shocking enough, but the woman’s atmosphere was even more frightening.

She was used to this.

Her expression made it clear this was not the first time she had seen a dead body. In fact, she looked like she had created as many dead bodies as a normal person had received cardboard boxes from things bought online and plastic bags from convenience stores. She was not normal. A simple murderer would have been bad enough, but she was 2 or 3 levels beyond that.

My tongue trembled.

As it twisted around in my mouth, I just barely managed to get the words out.

“Don’t…move.”

“Why?”

I thought she was asking why she should do what I say.

But I was wrong.

"*Why do you think you have any control here*?"

"!?"

She understood something about the fear I was feeling. It was wrapped around me and holding me in place, but she accepted it as normal.

"They say curiosity killed the cat, but a sense of justice can destroy nations. I have experienced it, so I know what I am talking about. I am not saying it is necessarily bad, but don't let it control you. That can have worse results than a kid with a handgun tucked into his pants."

The woman took a step toward me.

She crushed my pathetic warning underfoot.

She crossed a certain line.

I moved backwards like I was being magnetically repelled by her. I then turned around so I could bring the Zashiki Warashi and Madoka with me to-…

"Th-they're gone!? Those two…!!"

They had likely already fled the restaurant. It didn't matter. I couldn't even work up anger at the fact that they had abandoned me. Instead, I was relieved that burden had been removed from me. My legs got tangled up underneath me and I half-ran, half-tripped out of the restaurant.

When I entered the hallway, I spotted the Zashiki Warashi and Madoka standing a bit away.

"You didn't run away!?"

"What are you talking about, Shinobu? You're the one that wouldn't respond when we called out to you."

The whole time?

How long did that last? Seconds? Minutes?

And when did it start? When the fear and abnormality of that woman wrapped around me? Or from the moment I had saw that worker get stabbed?

When I thought about it like that, I realized I should probably be thankful that they waited around that long when a murderer could be coming at any moment.

Madoka called out to me with her face horribly pale.

“Wh-what do we do now?”

“A room! You two get to one of the hotel rooms! Madoka, you stay with the Zashiki Warashi! She may not be deadly, but she’s still a Youkai. She isn’t easy to kill!!”

I doubted that girl in the red yukata would be any good in a fight and that nonstandard woman seemed like she could kill even a deadly Youkai without difficulty, so that hardly put my mind at ease. I couldn’t come up with a plan and attack her from some gap or blind spot. The fear that woman gave me seemed to utterly destroy the very assumptions and environment required to put together a strategy.

For some reason, the Zashiki Warashi puffed her chest out with pride and said, “Do not expect anything from me in a battle.”

“I’m not planning to fight either. I doubt I could put up any kind of a fight. I need to call the police. Either that or tell the other workers what happened. I just need to pass this off to some larger power. She’s locked on to us because we were the only witnesses. You need to stay holed up in a room until I can pass this off to someone else!!”

I heard footsteps.

They were coming from the restaurant.

They were not hurried footsteps. However, they were confident footsteps. They seemed to say she would catch up to us and kill us no matter what we did. Those calm footsteps seemed to tell me all our efforts would be futile.

“Go!!” I shouted and then ran down the hallway in the opposite direction of the Zashiki Warashi and Madoka.

I tried to make my footsteps as loud as possible to keep the woman’s focus on me rather than them.

Anyone. It didn’t matter who. I had to let as many people as possible know what had happened. I needed to rob that woman of her control of the situation with pure numbers. If all of the hotel's workers knew about the crime, her actions would be severely restricted. If the police arrived, she would have even more trouble.

This hotel was in an Intellectual Village sightseeing spot, so it had a large number of workers for the size of the facility. As I headed for the elevator hall, I happened across a female worker who was pushing a cart to carry a room service meal somewhere.

Her nameplate read Matsukai.

Matsukai?

"Wait, listen! The police!! Call the police right away!!"

"What…?"

"She's…!! She's coming!! You can't stay here! You don't have time to wait for the elevator! Use the emergency stairs!!"

"If you are having trouble, I may be able to help you. Is something the matter?"

No! You don't understand!!

The situation had gone well beyond that. It had shifted 2 gears up from that. But how was I supposed to explain how crazy this has gotten? A strange woman had attacked a worker with bestial speed and stabbed him with a fork. The worker had then committed suicide with some kind of poison. I barely believed it myself and I had seen it happen. The very best reaction I could expect was for her to head to the restaurant to see what happened.

And what would happen then?

That would just add another dead body to the pile. How much time had passed since the first death? What was going on in the restaurant now? Had a waiter or chef noticed anything was wrong? If they had…what would that woman do?

Would she just run away?

I couldn't imagine she would. I prayed it wasn't true, but that restaurant might have been turned into an ocean of blood.

"Um, sir?"

"No…no."

I couldn't wait for them to switch into the proper gear to deal with the situation. The police. It would be fastest to directly contact the people who made a living dealing with this kind of situation.

I frantically pulled out my cell phone with its broken camera lens.

"It won't…connect?"

I didn't receive a dial tone or even a message saying I had no signal. The only situation I knew of that would cause that was a widespread power outage caused by a lightning strike, but…

Was this just a coincidence?

"Does the hotel have a phone!?"

"…Wh-what!?"

"Does the hotel have a landline phone!? Is there a public phone around here!?"

"Oh…u-umm… The front desk on the first floor has-…."

Before she had even finished, I turned around and ran for the emergency staircase. It was dangerous to leave that female worker alone, but I had to call the police to the hotel as quickly as possible. And even if I had stayed to protect her, I doubted I could have bought her even a few seconds of time.

But it was no good.

When I arrived on the first floor, I picked up the public phone's receiver, but heard no dial tone. I could see nothing wrong or broken about the phone itself, so something on a larger scale was likely broken.

Since I could not contact them, I was forced to head directly to the police station.

But I was in the dairy Intellectual Village known as Fuuka Village.

For 20 to 30 kilometers around the hotel there was nothing but pastures. There was no way I could travel that distance on foot.

By car then?

I of course had no license, but I knew an automatic was the same as a go-kart. It had an accelerator and a brake. I would be travelling down a straight and flat road with no traffic lights, so I guessed I could probably make it.

It didn’t matter what I had to do.

I would break the window and destroy the connector in the keyhole if I had to.

I just had to get a car and get out of there.

I ran out of the hotel and headed around to the back. A number of electric cars were parked there, but I could not tell if they belonged to the workers or to other guests. It didn’t matter. But could I really leave the Zashiki Warashi and Madoka in the hotel? The hotel was about 3 stories tall. If I shouted, I guessed I could have them escape through the window and meet me. They could tie the curtains and use them as a rope to climb down.

But then…

“…What the hell…?”

What I saw when I got closer to the parking lot left me speechless.

Flat tires. Every single car in the parking lot had flat tires. Every single tire on every single car had been punctured. The sight of all those flat tires pounded an exceedingly simple form of despair into my mind.

I can’t escape?

Is this hotel like a desert island on land?

But something did not make sense. That woman may have been a monster, but could she really have done all that on her own? When had the phones stopped working? When had every single car tire been punctured? If she had begun to isolate the hotel only after killing the worker named Matsukai in the restaurant, she would have had to carry out multiple large scale jobs in an exceedingly short time. Could she really have done it on her own?

“No…”

That was not a major issue.

There was a simple solution.

That woman just needed accomplices.

"…"

I looked over at the great plain that was dissolving into the darkness. If I was up against multiple people or even an organization, they would not want us to contact the outside or to run away.

If I just headed out blindly into the darkness of the night, would they do nothing and let me go?

I did not know how many people I was dealing with, but wasn't it possible they already had the entire area surrounded?

That plain stretched on and on with no witnesses to be found. If they began pursuing me along there, they could take their time and make sure they killed me.

Of course…

That entire idea could have been nothing but a delusion.

It could have been nothing but the misguided fears of an amateur high school boy.

But since I had nothing to base my decision on, I could not get rid of that unease. I could not head into that darkness without hesitation.

But what else could I do?

I had no car. It was too dangerous to slowly continue on foot. But that woman was inside the hotel. The entire area seemed covered with death. How had I not noticed it before?

"…Self-defense…"

Since I could not call in help from outside, that was my only option. It would take time to get the workers and guests to switch gears, but our only option was to take back control of the situation with numbers!

But was that even possible for a collection of amateurs? Would the group only fall into more and more of a panic the more people we gathered?

No.

I had forgotten one important factor.

“Uncle Uchimaku is a police officer.”

The power of the police was one of an organization, so I had a feeling there was only so much my uncle alone could do. But surely a police officer would be able to bring the workers and guests together into a group easier than a high school student.

He just had to prevent everyone else from panicking.

If we could come together as a group and get a proper grasp of the danger, that woman would not be able to fight back.

…Right?

Part 16 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

I was only heading to the restaurant because I was hungry, but I could tell something was wrong before even setting foot inside. What was this smell that cleanly rid me of all hunger? Why, nothing other than the stench of fresh blood!!

As she walked next to me, the mystery freak's nose twitched like she had caught the scent of some soup.

"This could be bad. I just hope no one we know was involved."

"!?"

To my shock, Hishigami Mai exited the restaurant.

"Oh, you two seem to be getting along well."

"It's my sister. And here I was hoping no one we know was involved."

"Sorry about that. By the way, did you see a high school boy pass through here? One with blond hair, a delinquent look to the eyes, and a *false* atmosphere of overall incompetence."

"…You mean Shinobu?" My eyebrows twitched. "What the hell happened in the restaurant!? That strong a stench of blood isn't normal!!"

"You can take a peek if you like, but you probably wouldn't find it too interesting since you don't care about the dead. Also, that would be straying even further from the proper path, Mr. Dead-End Police Job."

"…"

"You should probably stay out too, Enbi. This is probably on a scale you can't handle and it isn't in your area of expertise."

"Is that stench of blood coming from someone we know?"

"No."

"Okay then. What are you going to do, detective?"

Neither of the two sisters meant any harm, but they were shaking the very meaning of my existence.

I doubted a proper police officer like me could control even the mystery freak. And if I got involved in something the older sister was involved in, I would probably end up playing the role of the pitiful victim.

But….

“I am a police officer.”

“This is outside your jurisdiction and you took leave, so you have no authority here.”

“That may be, but I can’t just turn my back on this!!”

I grabbed Mai’s shoulder, pushed her out of the way, and took a step into the restaurant.

And…

I immediately regretted it.

Was it a few seconds? A few dozen seconds?

I had no idea how long I remained frozen in place.

Time certainly passed and I was certainly aware of my surroundings.

The scene before me burned into my mind and would not leave. The incident itself was in a category that should have been more peaceful than something like arson, but it gave me a much more vivid impression. Yes, vivid. Bright. I was supposed to be someone who detested crime, but I almost felt impressed by the skill involved.

I should have worked up a resistance to this type of thing.

It was my job to confront this type of thing.

I was so used to it that a corpse with severed limbs stuffed into a metal drum only made me comment on the effort that had to have gone into it.

Yet I found this to be on a whole other level.

The world a few steps in front of me was filled with a fascination that seemed to overcome reality.

“You were right to stop there.”

Mai, the person who had likely created what I was seeing, grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back. Whether due to her strength or my lack of ability to resist, she easily pulled me out of the restaurant.

“Someone who knows a bit of kendo is more easily fascinated by techniques and skill than a complete amateur. You need to be careful.”

Meanwhile, Enbi the mystery freak displayed her usual ability to neutralize any strangeness when it came to dealing with corpses. She seemed as calm as if nothing had happened as she walked up near the much too vivid corpse, crouched down, and began making various observations.

She spun a large magnifying glass around in one hand, but she never really used it to look at anything. It may have been similar to how people would fiddle with their cell phone when they had nothing else to do with their hands.

Enbi seemed to come to a conclusion from the complexion of the corpse’s face and the foam around its mouth.

“Fugu. It’s easy enough to get your hands on, but it isn’t the best option for suicide. You can see he was putting up with a lot of pain by how his nails have dug into his palms. It must not have been fun to know that was hidden in your tooth.”

“A painful death must have doubled as the penalty for failing his mission.”

“His mission, hm? …I don’t like the sound of that. It makes it sound like a war is being fought in this peaceful country.”

“That’s why I said this isn’t the place for you, little sister. This isn’t a simple murder.”

The sisters’ conversation seemed to be coming from a long distance away.

As my thoughts cut in and out intermittently, I finally opened my mouth to speak.

“How was…Shinobu involved…in this?”

“He saw it.”

“He’s just a kid in high school!! He shouldn’t be getting involved in this kind of thing. There’s nothing he can do about it! There’s no value in eliminating him for-…!!”

“Make no mistake. I am not looking for him in order to silence him. But it does seem he had some involvement in all of this from the beginning. His involvement did not begin with witnessing my actions here.”

“…?”

“It has already begun, detective. That is why I have begun to take action. And now Jinnai Shinobu-kun is wandering in the darkness while completely oblivious to what is really going on. He needs to understand what is happening before he runs across a pitfall.”

“Um, what did that worker named Matsukai do…?”

“Matsukai Hiroshi. But that isn’t the name of their organization or anything.”

I did not particularly want to know more, but it seemed Hishigami Mai had begun a conflict with some force that Matsukai Hiroshi was a part of.

Her point seemed to be that, even if she had no intention of harming Shinobu, the opposing force that Matsukai Hiroshi belonged to might.

And how did Shinobu fit into it all?

From what Mai had said, it didn’t seem he had simply stumbled upon the crime scene.

“Can I ask you one thing?”

“That’s up to you to decide.”

“Does this have to do with Youkai?”

“A Package would be my little sister’s territory,” said Hishigami Mai simply. "If it requires my involvement, it is guaranteed to be *something more than that.*"

As if it was nothing, she broke down one of the mental pillars supporting me. I could not imagine what kind of world that woman lived in. Even Packages using Youkai often proved difficult for the modern Japanese police to handle. We could neither kill nor arrest a deadly Youkai. The most we could manage was arresting the human criminals using those Youkai. What kind of a world did she live in and with what kinds of things did she fight?

That abnormal mystery freak was more used to this kind of situation than me and had no problem being around that corpse. She jotted something down using the memo function of her smartphone that had a leather memo pad cover.

While doing so, she asked her sister, "What are you going to do?"

"Naturally, I am going to do something about this situation. First, I need to check on the scale of this incident. I'm interested how they handled the real hotel workers. Did they forge a resume so Matsukai Hiroshi alone could infiltrate the hotel or have all of the workers been switched out with fakes? …Well, I get the feeling it will be the more severe answer."

"What should we do?"

"Think for yourself. To be blunt, the risk does not change much either way. The violence we are going to see here is not something you can protect yourself from with nothing but the lock on your hotel room door, but you might get caught in the crossfire if you stick with me."

"Then I'll stay with you. What about you, detective?"

"Eh? Ah…?"

"Don't worry about honor or convenience. There is no absolutely safe place. Decide for yourself what to do with your life," said Enbi.

I could feel sweat pouring from my body.

The Japanese police could not even handle a standard Package. Yet these sisters were setting foot in territory well beyond that. What could a single police officer without the support of the rest of the police hope to do in a situation like that? It would be too naïve to assume I could shine a light on the darkness. My tiny point of light would just be swallowed up by the darkness.

But…

“Shinobu is out there. Odds are good he will end up heading deeper into this before we do. I can’t back down until I find him. It doesn’t matter if I can act as a police officer or not.”

For some reason, Mai began to grin when she heard that.

“Oh, so that’s the power of the state.”

“If you were saying that for a girl rather than your nephew, you could make a decent protagonist.”

“I don’t need to be one. I’m fine with being a police detective stuck in a dead end job, so let’s get the story moving. Where are we headed?”

“Follow me,” said Mai.

We followed her through the hotel. As we did, I noticed something odd. There was no noise. The hotel was covered in silence. It was even quieter than hotels normally were. It was complete and utter silence. I felt like we were walking through an old abandoned building. Humans created a certain level of noise simply by being in the area. That noise was missing.

“With Matsukai Hiroshi’s cover blown, the others may have decided there is no point in continuing their act.”

“So all the workers are working with that Matsukai guy?”

“Yes, but those workers probably aren’t the actual hotel staff.”

We arrived at the front desk on the first floor. No one was there. However, Mai and Enbi were looking at something else. It was the large diagram of the hotel set up behind the front desk.

“If this was all set up from the beginning and they took some large-scale preparations, where do you think they would hide the unneeded hotel workers?” said Mai.

“They might have already taken the bodies elsewhere,” pointed out Enbi.

“It’s entirely possible, but even that would not get rid of every trace. They had no reason to get rid of everything. If they were going to go around erasing every trace including fingerprints and bloodstains, it would be simpler to quickly build an entirely new hotel. And that would make sure they didn’t miss anything.”

“The boiler room.”

“What?”

Mai frowned and Enbi explained further.

“There were probably somewhere between 50 and 100 workers, right? If they were going to carry the bodies out, it would be difficult to do so as is. Not only is there the simple size issue, but if they got pulled over for a random drunk driving check, that would be the end for them. It would be safer to transport the bodies after changing their form. If you get pulled over for speeding or drunk driving, they aren’t going to check the composition of the ash in a bag of fertilizer.”

“Even in this large plain, they couldn’t exactly have burned them outdoors. I suppose it would be safest if they could get the needed firepower indoors.”

“It’s possible they filled a bathtub with powerful acid, but transporting that dangerous liquid here would be a risk in and of itself. Also, you can’t just dump the entire body in there like in movies. If you try to dissolve too much at once, the chemical reaction grows too violent and the acid scatters everywhere and it creates a lot of smoke. It would be way too much of a pain to chop that many people up and dissolve them bit by bit. I say burning them to ashes would have been their safest method.”

Safest. It made me shudder to imagine it, but this was a world where that kind of thing was normal. I couldn’t allow myself to be swallowed up by it. I had to preserve my sense of myself. I had stepped into this territory of my own will.

The diagram had the entrance to the boiler room labeled with the warning color meaning it was off limits. It looked like we had to head down a staircase to the basement. We headed for that staff-only area and approached that staircase.

The entrance to the staircase was sealed with a thick door.

Mai opened the metal door and then…

“Uncle!!”

I heard someone shout. I frantically turned around and spotted Shinobu running around a corner of the hallway. He seemed unharmed. But before I could breathe a sigh of relief, the situation took a strange turn. Shinobu glared at Mai as he approached.

“Get away from her!! Don’t even think about trying to arrest her. The way she killed that guy wasn’t normal at all!!”

“Ah…”

Not good.

Shinobu was mistaken about something. But it was not whether Mai was good or bad that he was mistaken about. It was that he had any chance of stopping Mai even if he made clever enough decisions.

In the end, Shinobu grabbed a fire extinguisher.

I could not blame him for trying to defend himself, but it only made the situation worse.

It was unclear if Shinobu actually had it in him to attack her.

Either way, Mai did not hesitate. When someone who may or may not be an enemy approached you like that, it was obvious how you should deal with the situation.

In the next instant, something happened.

Due to my police training, I knew a bit of judo and kendo, but I could not keep up with what happened. This was partially due to the pure speed with which the actions were taken, but the types of actions were also well beyond what I expected.

And…

“Whoops.”

That was the first thing Mai said. Her voice sounded completely relaxed. She spoke when she looked in the direction she had thrown Shinobu. I looked over as well…and then I shouted out.

He flew through the door leading to the boiler room.

My nephew’s body fell down the staircase and into the darkness.

Part 17 (Jinnai Shinobu)

“Gh!?

Gweh!”

My head spun. I could not tell up from down. I could see a cold, concrete wall in my dim vision. Where was I? A flickering fluorescent light illuminated a wide area filled with pipes and a steel-box-like device about the size of a small storage room. At first glance, I couldn’t figure out what it was for, but the pipes had analog meters on them. The paint was peeling and I saw rust in places, so the area looked quite different from the rest of the hotel. It looked like something from an old factory or prison.

I had fallen down the stairs.

By the time I realized that, I also realized my hand on the floor was touching something sticky.

At first I thought my head had split open, but it wasn’t blood on my fingers.

It was something black and oil-like.

“What…is this place…?”

I glanced around despite my hazy vision, but then heard footsteps.

They were coming from above.

Was someone coming down the staircase?

“Gh…Ghhhh!!”

I frantically tried to move away from the stairs, but I felt intense pain the instant I tried to use my muscles. None of my bones seemed broken, but I needed time before I could move. I did not think the pain would go away anytime soon, but I wanted time to get used to it.

While I lay almost unmoving on the floor, a voice spoke from up the stairs.

"Okay, I really didn't expect for that to happen. Sorry about that. But I need to make sure we're safe before I check your injuries. Just stay there for now."

What are you talking about? Check my injuries? Safe? You're the one that caused all this.

I wanted to say that out loud, but I could not get the words out because a pain throbbed in my head at irregular intervals. Meanwhile, the woman made it down the stairs. The instant her feet touched the cold floor, I felt a chill run down my spine and pain exploded within me, but the woman unexpectedly walked right around me. It looked no different from someone walking around a puddle along the road.

"So this is the boiler room. Wow, this is horrible. We don't exactly need to check for a luminol reaction."

Boiler? No, wait. Luminol? Isn't that what you use to check for bloodstains? You just need to rub it with a cloth to get a reaction.

The woman headed further into the darkness that the half-functioning fluorescent light could not completely do away with.

"This must be the inspection opening for maintenance. It's a decent size. You could probably fit a human inside. Oh, there's even some hair left over."

I decided to not worry about my questions and to focus on moving...but first I needed to grow accustomed to the pain. I wasn't sure what was going on, but I could tell this was a much too dangerous place to be. That woman herself was dangerous, but her words were filled with a dangerous atmosphere. Who was the real enemy here? Was it someone other than that woman? Or was that woman involved in it all?

I tried to move.

…And it worked.

Either the emergency situation had dulled my senses or my mind was simply growing duller overall. Either way, the sharp pain that had been stabbing into my head changed into something more feverish. The fact that my body's SOS signals were dulling was not exactly a good thing, but I could hardly be picky at the moment. I pressed my hands against the floor and lifted my upper body up into a kneeling position.

I then moved toward the staircase.

I didn't care what it took. It was too dangerous to stay where I was. I headed for the staircase.

"Ow."

I placed a hand against the wall and stood the rest of the way up. I turned around, but that woman seemed to still be checking things out deeper within the boiler room. I headed up the staircase on shaky legs. I moved slowly. I made sure to make as little noise as possible. It may have been safer to crawl up the stairs on all fours. That was how much my vision was shaking.

The woman did not pursue me.

Had she still not noticed me or was she letting me go?

I couldn't tell. My mind was not clear enough to determine her intentions and possibly use them against her. I didn't care if it was the bed in my hotel room or the futon in my home. I just wanted to get back up to ground level and find somewhere to sleep.

I then arrived at the 1st floor.

But I realized something was wrong.

"…What…?"

It was quiet. Too quiet. This was the silence of a room after a TV showing a variety program filled with high-pitched laughter was suddenly switched off. That silence made me realize again that I was the only one in the room. Silence, silence, silence. Something was missing. Something important was missing. The hotel was wrapped in an unnatural silence that could not be achieved simply by holding your breath and staying still.

Wait.

Where had they gone?

"All of the hotel workers were replaced. They have all disappeared now that we found out. That is why everything feels so unnaturally silent.”

All of a sudden, the woman was standing next to me.

I had no idea when she had come up the stairs.

But that was not the most pressing issue on my mind.

Another issue was more important than how that woman had gotten within a meter of me.

“*Where are they?*”

“Who?”

“*My uncle and that girl were here before! I’m asking you where they are!*”

“They probably went to find a first aid kit after seeing what happened to you.”

Something wasn’t adding up. I couldn’t figure out if she was playing dumb or not. But it didn’t matter. I ran away from the woman and down the hotel hallway.

I had to find them first.

They had to be around here somewhere!

An unrealistic possibility floated up in the back of my mind: What if they had simply disappeared as if swallowed up by the silence and I could not find them no matter what I did?

But that nightmarish possibility did not come true.

Unfortunately, what I did find was much, much worse.

Part 18 (Jinnai Shinobu)

Time seemed to be torn into pieces. Or maybe it was my memories. Either way, the timeline of events was in complete disarray. When I tried to remember it later, it seemed all mixed up. Every individual scene was burned vividly into my mind, but I could not reconstruct the order in which I saw them.

The scenes were more than just images.

An oppressive stench of blood hanging in the air. A burnt taste mixed in with the air when I breathed. A noise that hurt my ears. A sticky, melting feeling. It was all in the past, but whenever it periodically came back to me, I was inundated by layer after layer of sensations.

It all felt crazy.

The middle-school-aged girl who had been with my uncle was in the restaurant kitchen. No, she was collapsed within it. Collapsed on top of the gas stovetop. I could hear a noise that sounded like Chinese food being prepared. Her cute face was burnt black beyond recognition, the slender lines of her body had been fused with her clothing, and almost everything else about her was just *horribly wrong* as well. Only her right arm hanging down had escaped the flames. Their relative normalcy made the rest of her seem that much more horrible.

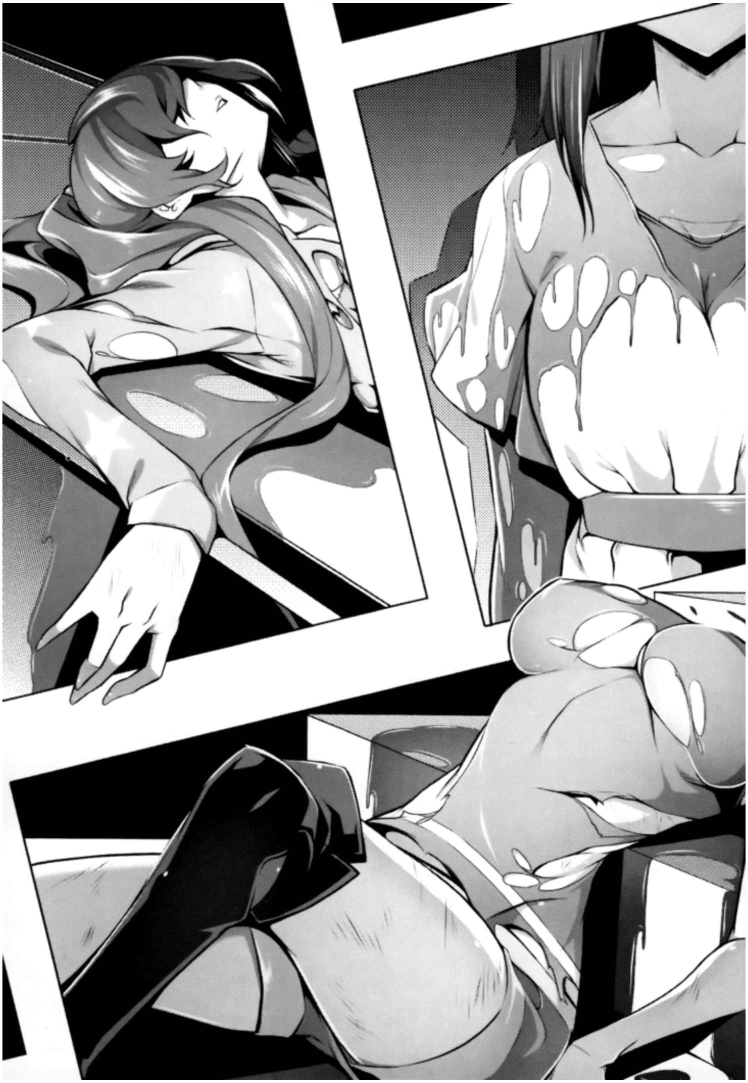
Who had done that to her?

I had no time to think.

Kotemitsu Madoka was hanging within the hotel lobby. She was hanging down from the ceiling like a chandelier. I could hear a creaking noise as she swayed back and forth at the perfect height to hide *a triangular-shaped diagram on the back wall of the lobby*. At first, I thought she had been hanged, so I wondered if it was possible to save her. But I was wrong. She was hanging from a thick hook meant to catch Pacific bluefin tuna weighing over 200 kilograms. It was hooked into her upper jaw just as it was designed to. I could not see where the tip of the hook went, but it was obvious not enough room was left in her head for its proper contents. Her eyes. Both eyeballs were bulging out to an unbelievable degree. It looked like they were being pushed out from inside. Her face had been destroyed. It was much too tragic a fate for a teenage girl.

Had that woman done this?

But was it even possible? It was much too complex. She had been too far away. At the very least, that girl with my uncle had been alive when that woman had knocked me down the stairs. She had come down the stairs after me almost immediately afterwards.



I headed off to search for that woman. Perhaps I was trying to find the truth. Perhaps I was trying to run away from the reality of those corpses. I didn't care. That woman had to have more information than I did. She had to. Whether she was the cause of all this or not, she had to know more than a high school student like me.

I had to find her and get her to tell me what she knew.

That was my plan.

When I returned to the entrance to the boiler room, the door was half open for some reason. I peered inside and saw that woman collapsed halfway down the stairs. She was lying on her back. She had no head. It did not look like her head had been severed with a sharp blade. The wound looked odd. It made me imagine someone trying to pull off the head of a toy doll, failing, and being forced to twist the neck around until it finally gave way. When I saw her arms and legs continuing to spasm, I felt a bit relieved because I mistakenly thought she might still be alive. But then it hit me.

How could she be alive if she has no head?

How could she be alive with all that blood gushing from the wound?

When I realized her limbs were merely writhing around on their own due to the rapid blood loss, I finally accepted that she was dead. I accepted it. But…what did that mean?

Wasn't that woman supposed to hold the truth of the situation?

Wasn't she supposed to either be the source of it all or at the very least be the closest person I knew to the core of it all?

Either way, she was the least normal of the people I knew.

However, she was not the very top.

…What can I hope to do?

That fundamental question came to mind. It didn't matter if I knew the truth or not. If I knew a typhoon was about to hit landfall, could I do anything to change its path? I was nothing but a high school student. There was nothing I could do but hang up a Teru Teru Bouzu. It was possible someone with real authority might be able to send out a bomber to disseminate special chemicals into the air to physically change the atmospheric pressure, but that was nothing but a fantasy for someone like me. It was just a story. It had nothing to do with the reality I had to face. I wasn't in a position to even know if there was anything that could be done, much less whether a specific method was possible.

Only those in pursuit needed to know the truth.

And I did not stand in that position.

I could not hope to do anything with the information. And any information I did get was less likely to give me a detailed view of the situation than it was to narrow my field of vision and keep me from being able to keep track of the entire situation.

It was possible the best term for my position was "victim".

By the time I found my uncle, all my senses had numbed over. He was in one of the guest rooms. I had no idea if it had been his room or not. Both of his legs had been severed, and his neck was awkwardly caught on a broken window frame. He had been slowly and gradually strangled to death. A normal hanging provided a quick death from pressure on the carotid artery and the destruction of the cervical vertebrae, but he had not been so lucky. His had been a painful death. He would have been able to ensure a slight passage for breath by supporting his body on the ends of his severed legs which would have earned him 10 to 15 minutes of painful struggling…but I had lost the calm needed to figure even that much out.

My mind was beginning to break down.

I could feel it happening.

The number of murders and bodies alone should have left some kind of hint, but I could figure nothing out. Even if there was some clue to be found, that was a job for a detective. The lack of any source of information was so sudden that I could not even begin to think about looking for any further hint.

What had happened to the other guests?

What had happened to the other workers?

I was not calm enough to think through all of those questions. My breathing grew erratic. My mind was not functioning properly.

Utter annihilation. Complete slaughter. How much time has passed since *the incident in the restaurant? I've lived for about a decade and a half. If pitfalls of this magnitude exist in life, how did I manage to live as long as I have?*

…Wait.

"Something's sticking in the back of my mind. …What is it?"

Where had I felt that feeling before? I sensed something odd about the string of words that had passed through my head.

How much time? …No, that isn't it. Restaurant? …No, not that either. Oh, right. My overall impression of the situation.

Utter annihilation.

Complete slaughter.

Those terms were not accurate. And not simply because I had survived. Someone else had escaped. This was not utter annihilation nor was it a complete slaughter. At the very last, there was someone else I had not checked on yet.

Yes.

That's right.

"…The Zashiki Warashi…?

The cracks of that odd feeling spread. Things were not adding up. It was not simply that the Zashiki Warashi was not present. For example, I could not remember the order in which the tragedies had happened. What about the blood? Had it started drying as time passed? That should tell me in what order the bodies had been made. And yet I still had no idea. Hadn't every scene been dripping with blood like something from a movie or a drama?

I began to head back the way I had come.

I wanted to check to see if what I had seen was still in the same place

But then…

Someone struck me roughly on the right shoulder.

I thought someone behind me was trying to stop me.

But I was wrong.

“Hey, are you all right?”

That female voice came from directly in front of me.

The voice belonged to that woman who should have been dead.

Part 19 (Jinnai Shinobu)

Just as the feeling that something was not quite right grew too powerful to ignore, I sensed something that destroyed the unnatural silence. It was a noise. The noise of a human being other than myself. That noise had returned. It was faint and the hotel as a whole was still wrapped in silence, but I could sense another living being nearby.

At first, it came from directly in front of me.

The woman who had stabbed Matsukai-san in the restaurant was peering at my face.

“W-wahh!?’

“What did you see? You weren’t bewitched or something, were you?”

Bewitched. When I heard that term that was usually seen in fairy tales, I started to question why I had not thought of that possibility before. When faced with an unrealistic phenomenon, wasn’t it likely some kind of unrealistic existence was involved?

In other words…

A Youkai.

“You…you…”

“What?”

“I thought you died in the boiler room…”

“So you did see something.”

It looked like the woman was about to ask me for details, but she suddenly stopped.

She stopped because of another noise.

Just a moment before, noise had brought me calm, but this noise was unpleasant. It continued at even intervals, so it had to be something like footsteps.

However, it was completely different from any footsteps I had ever heard before.

It sounded like someone crushing rotten fish underfoot.

Something liquefied was slowly approaching.

But from where?

I could hear the noise coming from beyond the slight darkness left by the dim lighting, but I could not tell what was causing it. And why was the lighting so dim? It may have been night, but a hotel hallway should have been more properly lit. What was this blindness that seemed to be oozing across the area?

“Not good.”

I never saw her pull it out, but the woman now had an automatic pistol that fit within her palm. Its small size seemed a waste with the plastic-bottle-sized suppressor attached.

Is that…real?

I had never before seen a real gun other than a hunting rifle, but I doubted she would be pulling out a toy at a time like this.

“This really isn’t good. It took me this long to grasp what was truly going on. …By the way, do you know what this is, boy?”

“I’m not obsessed with guns, so I can’t recognize a specific handgun.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

It was then that I finally noticed something.

Despite her calm expression, I could see sweat on her brow.

That woman was sweating nervously.

“If I have to rely on this, I have 80% lost already. I may be a bit biased, but I would say I am quite useful. I am at least useful enough to frequently receive jobs from Hyakki Yakou. But that doesn’t mean I am invincible or that there is no one more powerful than me. There are people I would lose to.”

“What are you talking about?”

"I think one such dangerous person is about to appear here. This is very, very bad. This goes beyond an evil spirit. That bastard summons up illness magic like calling in an aerial bombing via GPS. I would say this is on the same level as some noble's grudge that can destroy an entire city. This isn't a force you use to target individuals…"

I did not understand the entire second half of what she said. She may not have gathered her thoughts properly. This person and situation had caused that woman to fall into such great confusion. At first, I thought this was a continuation of that possible illusion of unknown origin, so I started to panic.

The woman tossed me something while staring into the slight darkness.

A radio? A cell phone? No, this is…

"It's a satellite phone. They aren't very common in Japan, but surely you've seen them in movies and foreign dramas. You can make calls without using the local cell phone towers."

"Are you telling me to call the police?"

"I sincerely hope this is a situation small enough for them to handle. But I doubt it is." She still did not look in my direction. "0015. That will unlock it. Then it works just like a normal cell phone. You have to enter the country code at the start, but you don't have to worry about it as long as you use one of the numbers in memory. …One of the numbers is registered under the name 'Hyakki Yakou'. Once you call them, *all the characters involved will finally be gathered.*"

"Characters involved…? What do you mean!? What is happening in this hotel!? Why did you stab Matsukai-san!? What was that strange illusion I saw!? I can't tell what is real anymore!!"

"The scale of this incident is much larger than just this hotel!"

"Wha-…?"

"Just go. If you saw what I can guess you saw, you are probably the only one who can resolve this incident. It is only you, the amateur, that can do this; not me, the expert! I don't like it, but I have to leave my life in your hands!!"

"Wait. Wait! I don't understand. What happened to my uncle and that other girl!? What about Madoka!?"

"The detective and my little sister have already fled! That is why I am in such a bind here. I haven't seen Kotemitsu Madoka. But the things you saw have probably not *yet* happened!!"

The wet footsteps approached another step.

The noise did not sound at all human to me.

The woman seemed to overreact.

"Go!! If you stay here, you will undoubtedly die. Not even I will last long. So use that satellite phone to its fullest! As I said before, you are probably the only one who can!!"

"Dammit…"

I didn't understand what was going on, but I gave in to my desire to flee from those strange footsteps. The woman stayed where she was. It wasn't normal to be able to stand up to that. Was courage really the right term for the source of her willpower?

The woman remained while I ran down the hallway. I fled.

If what I had seen before was an illusion, then Madoka, my uncle, and that other girl would still be alive. I decided to check their rooms. And I had to check on the Zashiki Warashi.

As I ran, I thought about what that illusion could have been.

In all likelihood, it had to do with a Youkai. But I could not figure out what Youkai it could have been related to. And had it really been nothing but an illusion?

If so, that was fine.

A mental illusion that you entered at some unknown point was certainly frightening, but it was not hopeless.

But there was another possibility…

"If that was a vision of the future, this could hardly be worse…"

And there were Youkai that could do that. For example, the Kudan. The Kudan was a dangerous Youkai with the head of a human and the body of a cow that did nothing but predict people’s deaths. If this was a Package using one of those, I could not ignore that illusion.

And that woman had mentioned something about illness magic that could probably kill all of us at the predicted time.

I could not quite figure out what advantage the illusion gave, but it had to have taken a fair amount of preparation to cause that mysterious phenomenon. They would not have set it all up for no reason. They had some objective. If I could figure out what that was, I would likely find the key to unlocking the mysteries of this incident.

With that key, I could figure out who would gain the most from it.

And I could figure out what Youkai was being used.

“…Huh?”

I realized something upon reaching the front desk of the hotel.

I may have figured out a one portion of the enemy’s identity.

I knew of a Youkai that would hint at a dangerous future.

I knew of a Youkai that could change how it appeared to humans.

Part 20 (Zashiki Warashi - Yukari)

Due to that strange woman going nuts in the restaurant, I still had not eaten dinner. My annoyance was growing. Madoka had not said anything for a while. She may have been worried about Shinobu, but I could not be sure because Zashiki Warashi unfortunately did not have the ability to read minds.

Someone started knocking violently on the door. Was it Shinobu? He had given me the key, so he had no way to open the door. I looked through the peephole and spotted someone unexpected. It was Uchimaku Hayabusa. He had some girl I did not recognize with him. The Sunekosuri from before stood at the girl's feet. He had called it a sad instinct, but I had a feeling his personal preferences played a part in it. At any rate, it was strange indeed for Uchimaku Hayabusa to come to me. Then again, it might have been Shinobu he was looking for.

I cracked the door open with the door guard still closed.

As expected, Uchimaku Hayabusa's entire body jumped in shock when he saw my face through the gap. But he did not stop there. He spoke to me like something was pushing him forward.

"Are you okay?"

"You say that like something dangerous is going on."

I had an idea what it might be.

After all, I had witnessed a man getting stabbed in the restaurant.

The girl cut in.

"You arrived with Madoka, right? Do you know where she is? She wasn't in her room."

"She's in here with me."

"Shinobu…hasn't come by yet, has he?"

"I haven't seen him since he went off to contact the police. Since he isn't back, he must not have had much luck."

"The police?"

"Because he saw a murder."

"Dammit, Mai. Has she still not released Shinobu?"

"Hey," I cut in. "You seem quite used to this kind of odd situation."

"Well, I am a police detective."

"Not you. The girl next to you."

"Unfortunately, I am even more used to being around corpses than the detective."

The Sunekosuri at her feet jumped in shock when he heard those easily-spoken words. He continued to rub up against her slender legs, so in a way, he did have guts.

Something was bothering me, so I asked about it.

"So is this incident related to Youkai?"

"Um, well…maybe. Just the other day, the detective and I were caught in the middle of a Package on Zashou Island that used Funa Yuurei."

"What about the Sunekosuri?"

"Eh!? M-me? I haven't done anything!! It was all Hishigami Mai-san's doing!! It's her fault that I had to live through that nightmare and couldn't return to HQ! And just when I think I can rest here in Fuuka Village, we run into them again!!"

Hmm…

And then you add in Shinobu, Madoka, and me.

I hadn't realized it at first, but their oddly casual acceptance of this strange situation was bringing me a gradual understanding of what was going on. If a normal person saw a murder, they would fall into a confused panic. It was not normal for them to even be able to put their thoughts in order. So when they were faced with something beyond that, they should have had their hands full simply trying not to be swept away by the nonsensical phenomena occurring before their eyes. And yet these people were different. Everyone gathered here had experienced some incident related to Youkai recently.

And I was a last-minute inclusion as a pet.

If some third party had predicted that far, it had to be an organization with quite a powerful backbone. When I had demanded to go along, Shinobu did not even have his ticket yet. He had merely mentioned the term “ticket”. Intentionally drawing out that feeling of jealousy from within me would have been much more difficult to set up than the little tricks they had to pull regarding the hotel itself. And if they had guided every person here in a similar manner, their skill could almost be called a curse.

To freely control things to that extent, the scope of this incident had to stretch farther than just this hotel. At the very least, it had to cover all of Japan.

But…

What was this third party planning to do by gathering people who had dealt with incidents related to Youkai?

Part 21 (Jinnai Shinobu)

While I waited for the elevator in the elevator hall, I messed with the satellite phone the woman had given me.

Its antenna was extremely thick and the body was unrefined. It looked more like a large radio transceiver than it did a cell phone. 0015. After I entered the number she had told me would unlock it, I could tell it was quite easy to use. You could make calls and send emails. That was it. It did not even have a memo function. However, she must have been the type to delete any kind of records because the mailbox was empty.

I opened the address book and found a few numbers.

None of the names looked like names of people. Nor did they look like the names of corporations. They looked more like names of groups or organizations, but I did not recognize any of them.

I moved the cursor to one of them.

The name for the number was Hyakki Yakou.

The last of the “characters involved”.

Even with this satellite phone, I doubted I could contact them repeatedly. If they hung up, it would likely all be over. It all came down to the first call. If they thought I was of little consequence, this last thin strand of hope would disappear.

But…

I had never met this person (?) listed as Hyakki Yakou.

And…

If I had some connection with someone I had never met, I could only think of one place that connection could come from.

After all…

It did not necessarily stay in one place. It had no clear owner. The possibility of having it leave you was always there. And since it was well known what happened in such a possibility, the odds of that possibility could not be all that low.

And so it was entirely possible Hyakki Yakou and I had a connection there.

"…"

I brought my thumb to the call button.

I hesitated.

But I pressed it in the end.

It did not ring. It likely would have normally, but someone on the other end picked up before it had a chance

"Hello," said someone who sounded like an elementary school girl.

However, her voice had a gracefulness unbefitting of that age.

I had never met her, but I felt like I had heard the voice before… and then I realized I had heard that same voice in a cell phone home video not long before.

"You need not pretend to be Hishigami Mai. I already know that phone has left her possession."

She "knew".

Was it simply that she had seen it happen? Or had she set this all up so it would happen?

"I know how we are connected."

"Is that all you wish to discuss?"

"The Zashiki Warashi," I said.

I decided to get straight to the point rather than trying any tricks.

I guessed the sudden shock of that knowledge would provide the most impact.

"A Zashiki Warashi is a Youkai that protects a specific house, but there is no guarantee they will stay in one place. After all, it is well known that a household a Zashiki Warashi leaves will decline. I have no idea what house she…Yukari used to be in. I just assumed she had always been in mine. But it is possible she used to be with yours."

"Is that a problem?"

"I know what it is that happened to me just a bit ago. It makes perfect sense. A Zashiki Warashi has the following abilities: 1. Adults cannot see them. 2. They provide ominous predictions of fires or other dangers to their household."

Then again, my grandparents could see our Zashiki Warashi without issue and I had never heard anything about her predicting a fire.

But…

That was an issue with our specific Zashiki Warashi. Those facts held true for the species as a whole.

"They can rewrite the information people see and they provide information on coming dangers. …That fits perfectly with the illusion I saw. What happened in this hotel? If what the woman who gave me this phone said is true, all of the workers here have been switched out with fakes. You created a Package to acquire that Zashiki Warashi, didn't you?"

"Is that all you know?"

"What?"

"I am asking if that is the extent of your knowledge. If so, I am sorry to say that I see no reason why I must continue this conversation."

"If luring the Zashiki Warashi to this hotel was your top priority…"

I thought hard while I spoke.

But it was not enough.

I had my hands full already, but if I did not gather my hand quickly, I would lose the thin thread of hope that was the phone call.

"The lodging ticket for this hotel came to me via Madoka. That seems odd. Surely you had some way of giving one directly to the Zashiki Warashi."

“I am sorry to say that-…”

“It seems odd that you would use such a roundabout method. For one thing, it means you had the precision to know for a fact she would announce she was going along as a pet. But that isn’t the only reason. If you can control people with that precision, you should have been able to lure the Zashiki Warashi to the hotel without bringing Madoka and me along too. And that means,” I paused for a second. “*You purposefully brought Madoka and me here. Our inclusion was unrelated to the Zashiki Warashi.*”

In my mind, I wondered if that was enough. However, I did not have time to think everything through carefully. If I fell silent, the girl would hang up. But I still felt like I was onto something.

“And that makes me suspicious of the guests other than Madoka and me. Is it just a coincidence that they are here too? Is there perhaps some kind of common thread between all of our inclusions? There is little in common between Madoka and me. Assuming we were not chosen for being in the same class in the same school, I can think of only one other possibility. …We were both involved in the Youkai incident at the Sanatorium.”

“Are you suggesting the other guests are also deeply related to Packages or Youkai?”

“I have no proof, but I could gather it if need be.”

“What could we possibly want from gathering all of you in one place?”

“You gathered a group of people who had overcome some incident involving Youkai and then caused a bizarre phenomenon centered on that Zashiki Warashi.”

That illusion.

Other than its precision, I could not immediately see any monetary value in that bizarre phenomenon.

But that was not the point.

The actual phenomenon did not matter. Something that gave it added value existed within the hotel.

“Here is what you are doing. You want to envelop the entire hotel in the Zashiki Warashi Package, and then easily defeat and kill us. That would be a success for you. I suppose it's an issue of flexibility. By showing that this Package is something like an unavoidable black hole that swallows up even people who have dealt with various different kinds of incidents, *you give your Package a valuable brand name image.*"

That's right.

It was the same as an Intellectual Village that strengthened the brand name image of their crops by using cutting edge technology to create the clean image of a rural area.

Hyakki Yakou was doing the same.

They had put together this plan to raise the value of their Youkai products.

What I did not know was whether they were actually in the business of buying and selling or if they were establishing manufacturing techniques and researching means of application.

"…So you have worked that much out," said the girl.

"Indeed I have."

"But I still see little meaning in continuing this conversation. You have not completely changed my mind. This may be useful to you, but I see no value in it for me."

"Don't be so quick to decide that. That woman gave me this satellite phone. She could have tried to negotiate with you or threaten you, but she didn't. She handed this last thin thread of hope to me. Why do you think that is?"

"…"

"Because it is my house's Zashiki Warashi at the core of this incident. I am the point of contact here. I have no intention of claiming I own her and she may have been in your household at one point. But I am probably the one with the strongest connection to her at this point in time. It isn't you."

"Do you think you can interfere with our assembly using that connection?"

"Do you think I can't?"

…

That was of course a bluff. I did not have that ability and this "connection" was not something tangible. I had no idea how valuable a thing it was. Also, I doubted this enemy would actually take a high school student's words seriously.

But…

While my personal actions were one thing, I doubted that girl could ignore what that woman did.

And she had given the satellite phone to me.

"…We need a revival," said the girl.

"What?"

"For the most part, the organization actually taking action in the hotel is Saishi Kajin, not Hyakki Yakou. Does the name Matsukai Hiroshi sound familiar? They were absorbed into Hyakki Yakou the other day. We had to weaken them during the incident in Ubasute Village to do so. However, it was still not enough. We are still far from being revived. We need more than that."

"What are you talking about?"

"The house a Zashiki Warashi leaves will decline. That is exactly right. It took hundreds of years, but that is what happened to Hyakki Yakou. That is why we put together a plan to recover her as quickly as possible. She is not a new acquisition. We are merely taking back what we once lost. But even if we compensate for our lost power with her, it will not be enough to stop the decline. Hyakki Yakou has already begun to collapse. That is why we must use everything we have to raise the value of the Zashiki Warashi's power."

"Answer me!! What are you talking about!?"

"If you actually knew what you were talking about, what I said should have been enough. If that was not enough for you, I will count you as a secure asset."

Not good.

Don't let her shake your resolve.

"That woman was fighting with someone other than the Zashiki Warashi. Did you send them?"

"He is one of our top 5. He is one of Hyakki Yakou's few pure spell users. That alone is a sign of our decline, but he is enough to defeat Hishigami Mai. This is another secure asset. Even if she defeats him, he will take her out in the process. The Zashiki Warashi will not be destroyed before this can truly begin."

Dammit.

I was understanding less and less of what she was talking about. And the girl's tone of voice was plainly changing as well. The longer she continued speaking, the shallowness of my knowledge grew more evident.

I knew very little of what was going on.

The household or organization known as Hyakki Yakou had begun to decline. One of the reasons for that was that the Zashiki Warashi had left them. They wished to retrieve that Zashiki Warashi to prevent further decline.

But that was not enough to know how to stop their plan.

She was shaking my resolve, but I had nothing to shake her resolve with.

…*No.*

Wait.

What did that girl say?

And what did that woman say before we parted? She said she frequently receives jobs from Hyakki Yakou, right?

So…

"It is my duty to bring about the revival of Hyakki Yakou," said the girl.

Her words were icy.

She knew I had no trump card and would soon hang up.

"I will not shy away from sacrifice to do so. We absorbed Saishi Kajin, we will retrieve the Zashiki Warashi…and you all will be crushed underfoot to play the role of fertilizer. Sorry, but you cannot overturn this. I see nothing at your disposal that would allow that."

"Can I say one thing before you hang up?"

"What would that be?"

An amateur student like me had no hopes of victory when it came to Youkai or underground society.

I had to change my strategy.

I had to use some method where a student like me was superior.

"Young lady, you may be an expert when it comes to Youkai, but you don't like your science classes much, do you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's just…I'd rather not die in some plan thought up by an idiot who can't do math. I was hoping you would deny it. If I'm going to die, can't it at least be in some plan thought up by a genius!?"

"What…? Oh, I had heard that it used to be called science class. We call it 'life environment studies', and I like it just fine. Combining traditional science with history into one class was a decent idea, wasn't it? Then again, I just learn from the textbooks. I am homeschooled."

"Ha ha."

I could not help but laugh.

I had been afraid my acting wouldn't be good enough to fool her.

"Did they still call it 'life environment studies' when they were talking about curriculum reform, getting rid of the more relaxed schedules, and maybe even going to school on weekends for more class time? I thought they changed it back to just science class then."

The girl fell silent.

I then began speaking again to cut off her next excuse.

"And even the textbooks a homeschooled elementary school student would use will match the categories of the official curriculum. Once the schools stop calling it 'life environment studies', they would start making textbooks just for science. Wait…or would they? Which would it be?"

To be honest, a high school student like me had no idea how things worked for an elementary school student.

No matter how much knowledge someone gathered, there were things that only someone who was actually that age would know. And yet the person on the other end of the phone remained silent. They may have had extensive knowledge, but their confidence had been shaken by a student like me.

And that meant…

My guess had been right.

With the confidence that gave me, I took the plunge.

"How about you end this act. It's no fun now that I've figured it out."

"…"

"Was that not enough? *You're embarrassing yourself, so how about you start acting your age.*"

I said it.

It was a natural question to come up with given everything that had happened. Was the person I was talking to actually the person that woman had wanted me to contact with the satellite phone?

To be blunt, wasn't it possible she had been switched out with an imposter just like the hotel workers?

"Ha ha ha."

And…

I heard laughter. The voice was the same. It was the voice of a lovely young girl. But something about the tone of the voice had changed. The tone was that of a rude and vulgar man.

"Ha ha ha ha ha. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

“Enough pretending. It’s not like I can see you through the phone.”

“What tipped you off? That science vs. life environment studies business had to have only been the final push. You must have some more fundamental proof,” said the girl (?) while she gradually corrected the emotions hidden behind the words.

My answer was simple.

“That woman said she frequently receives jobs from Hyakki Yakou. And yet she did not hesitate to stab that worker from Saishi Kajin… Matsukai-san was it? That makes no sense if they had already been taken in by Hyakki Yakou. At the very least, she wouldn’t kill him on sight like that.”

“That is not proof. So all you really had was speculation.”

She did not explain what the fault in my reasoning was. Perhaps I did not have a proper understanding of the organization of Hyakki Yakou or of that that woman’s actions.

“But I will admit that you have seen through this farther than expected. Hyakki Yakou has split. One side is the Kaikoku faction that compromises and allows those outside the organization to take jobs in order to preserve order, and the other side is the Sakoku faction that will abandon order in order to strengthen the organization and keep everything within the organization.[1] The actual ‘removal’ did not begin until about a week ago, so it is unknown if Hishigami Mai is aware of the situation as she was working in Europe at the time.”

One side was trying to protect order and the other was trying to destroy it.

From the situation, it seemed clear to me which one was our enemy.

In the ideal democracy, the majority did not have power robbed from them.

“For something you planned, you certainly are talking about it like it doesn’t matter.”

“What, do you want me to be more triumphant and to brag about it? Gwa ha ha ha ha. All we did was purge the incompetent leaders.”

“…I see. You saw crushing them as such a natural move that it does not even excite you and you do not feel any need to explain yourself. Are you even aware what you did qualifies as a coup d’etat?”

In a way, this was even more dangerous than a hackneyed demon king.

Didn’t I hear someone say that a sense of justice can destroy nations?

“What happened to the real Hyakki Yakou? What happened to that girl?”

“I am part of the real Hyakki Yakou. Have you ever heard the story of the Tanuki of Kachi-Kachi Mountain that killed an old lady and took on her form?”

“…”

“Just kidding. Things did not go *that* well. But even though we split, it was not an even split. One side is much larger than the other. And we absorbed Saishi Kajin to expand even further.”

“So you joined with an external group despite insisting on the purity of the organization?”

“We overwrote them. We merely gave them a chance for a religious conversion. Discord only occurs when differing systems are built into the organization. If they are completely remade before we use them, no rejection reaction occurs. The main principle required is a unified format.”

…?

She was speaking with absolute confidence, but something about it seemed off to me.

Something about that ideology did not feel right.

It was like someone talking about a specific genre while not understanding any of the details of that genre. It was the same as how people would broadly describe matcha or red bean paste as tasting like Wagashi.

The Sakoku faction wanted to preserve purity by cutting off the normal flow of information and distribution, so would they actually carry out a plan that took in an external organization?

Was this girl (?) really part of the Sakoku faction?

In fact, was she even part of Hyakki Yakou?

Just as terrorist groups received support from powerful nations during the Cold War, it was possible she had merely been given her objective by whoever was truly behind the incident and that she actually had another objective of her own.

I had no idea what that might be, but I felt it would be prudent to keep that fact in mind.

Whether she had realized what I was speculating or not, the girl began to speak about what may have been related to her objective.

“The remnants of the old leaders abandoned their flying wing and have found somewhere to hide on land, but it is only a matter of time before they are found. They needed that wing to continually flee. It is self-evident what will happen if they stay in one place.”

According to her, Saishi Kajin had been overwritten by Hyakki Yakou and absorbed, but it was still possible that process had actually been begun by Saishi Kajin. Or perhaps both sides had complexly interweaving plans and they were both using the other for their own ends.

Dammit…

This was worse than simply not being able to negotiate. The person that woman had been expecting me to contact wasn’t even there, so the conversation could not even begin.

“Is keeping anything new out of the organization really that important?”

“If you were told to try living as a nudist for 24 hours starting tomorrow, would you simply nod and agree?”

Had this girl had checkmate from the very beginning?

Was the scope of the incident much larger than that woman had thought?

“Why did you choose this hotel?”

“For one, because its layout was easy to work into our plan. *But that is really of little consequence.* What truly mattered was Kotemitsu Madoka. We wanted to gather every single one of the characters we needed, but we had to stick to the formalities to lure her in. This hotel gave her peace of mind. If we had created a brand new hotel for this, she would have been too suspicious to get anywhere near it. …That did mean we had to do some horrible things to the original workers. That made this quite expensive.”

Her tone made it clear it was of little consequence to her.

Even if all of us were wiped out in the process of assembling this Zashiki Warashi Package, she would likely not even bat an eye.

“But it was not a major issue since almost everything has gone according to plan. Actually, some things have gone better than planned if you look at it in the right way. Circumstance has worked in our favor.”

“What?”

“Human greed can be a frightening thing. We had initially determined it would be impossible to have complete information control. That satellite phone is a good example. That was why we simply had to accept the possibility of you calling the police in. Since we were creating bizarre phenomena that would swallow up people who had overcome other Packages, we figured the police would just be swallowed up as well.”

“Wait. So the flat tires on the cars and the phones not working wasn’t Hyakki Yakou’s doing!?”

“Thanks to that, it looks like the precision of our Zashiki Warashi assembly will increase. It isn’t an entirely good thing on our part, but…it doesn’t really matter. It will give us greater results in the end.” The girl paused for a second before saying, “And if you were not aware of that, then you truly do not have a proper understanding of this situation.”

The connection cut off.

I reached for the redial button without thinking, but did not press it. I knew trying to call again would be hopeless. She had said she “knew” what we were doing. Unless I did something that drew the interest of the current Hyakki Yakou, she would not answer the phone again.

But…

“Hyakki Yakou isn’t the only enemy. Not all of the characters are accounted for yet.”

The flat tires.

The nonfunctioning phones.

“Just how many enemies do we have here…?”

Part 22 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

I first noticed that something wasn't adding up when we decided to pool our information in the Zashiki Warashi's room.

The Zashiki Warashi and Shinobu's classmate Kotemitsu Madoka both gave the same story.

Shinobu had gone off somewhere to call the police. And since he had not yet returned, he must not have had much luck. They guessed the phones were not working.

But…

"Mine works," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"*My cell phone has a proper signal.*"

It was possible Shinobu had lied to them and had gone off to do something else. But it seemed that was not the case. Kotemitsu pulled out her phone to check.

"Mine doesn't. It has no signal."

"Detective, neither does my smartphone. Maybe it's because we have different carriers. I don't even have a signal for the flat-rate calls using wi-fi."

I had a bad feeling about what this meant.

I had a good idea what could be causing it. Besides the carrier, there was one other obvious difference between my phone and theirs.

I was a police officer.

To prevent important information from getting blocked by congested phone lines in emergencies, there was a system to artificially restrict those phone lines. Cell phones owned by the police, firefighters, EMTs, the JSDF, and government workers had a different designation that was allowed through while that system was active.

And in that case…

The people cutting off communications to isolate the hotel had to be…

“It can’t be…”

I pressed the call button on my cell phone. I simply pressed the call button without entering a number. When the system was being restricted, the places that could be called were also restricted.

And someone answered.

“It connected,” I said.

“Is that enough for you to figure out who I am?” asked the person on the other end.

“If my phone works, this must not be a JSDF format communications restriction. My phone’s designation would only get through with the police format. And only the riot police have the authority to activate that system. So you must be…”

“That level of information isn’t enough to determine who I am. Of course, you could always try to back trace this number or analyze my voice print.”

“Why?” The question naturally spilled out of my mouth. “This is a high level system within the police. Why would someone high enough to use it be aiding criminals!?”

“I’m sure you know exactly why.”

“What?”

“You are the one that has seen this collapse of law and order the closest. All sorts of crimes being committed in this country can no longer be dealt with by the police. And those exceptions are growing. The very people who are committing crimes that must be punished are living among us as if they are on the side of justice.”

For an instant, I had no idea what he meant.

But then it hit me.

“Are you talking about the Hishigami sisters?”

"Our country is facing a crisis by allowing them to go free. People who know only a fraction of what they do are looking up to them and thinking they can do the same. These people have begun to appear and claim to be bounty hunters. But they are not very effective. They claim they are 'investigating' in order to justify stalking or explain away all sorts of destructive actions. Before long, they will likely decide who is guilty without carrying out a proper investigation and then carry out vigilante justice. We must put an end to this."

"Is it really so obvious that these people are being influenced by them?"

"You are an excellent example."

"I don't follow."

"Why are you in that hotel? Did you just decide to suddenly take 7 days of leave for fun? Would you normally let yourself do that as a government official? And yet there you are. *You decided there was nothing you could do to stop it since the Hishigami sisters were involved, didn't you?* That kind of oddity is not isolated to just you."

"But how will you fill in the gap this leaves? I will admit that those sisters don't exactly walk the straight and narrow, but they do achieve results when it comes to cases involving Youkai. In fact, it is impossible for the current system of the Japanese police to actually destroy a Package. All we can manage is to arrest the human criminals using the Package. It is very nearly impossible for us to do anything about the deadly Youkai at the core of the case."

That was why a Package would cause more and more damage once it was established. It would spread from person to person like new method of phone fraud.

"Unfortunately, we need the Hishigami sisters. We do not have the ability to overcome those things," I continued.

"*But that is no reason to turn a blind eye to the Hishigami sisters*."

He responded immediately.

He did not hesitate even for an instant.

"Our duty as the Japanese police is to stop crimes before they occur within this country and to solve cases that have already occurred.

The circumstances do not matter. Even if the Hishigami sisters knew the sole way of stopping an asteroid that was on a collision course with earth, we would have no choice but to immediately arrest them if they broke the law. That is our duty as the police.”

“…So you aren’t giving this any thought at all?”

“It is because you think too much that you give into them so easily.”

“So you have nothing to fill the gap left by the Hishigami sisters!? You know the victims of Youkai-related incidents in the country will skyrocket, but you’re still going to eliminate the Hishigami sisters just because you resent them for butting into the police’s turf!?”

“We do not think we can accomplish this via normal methods. It would be very difficult to reliably eliminate the Hishigami sisters with the means available to us.”

Dammit.

He isn’t listening to me at all.

“But the circumstances have turned in our favor. To be honest, having an organization like that operating within the country is a major problem, but we will deal with them later. The Hishigami sisters take priority. For now, we just have to carefully interfere with a conflict between different aspects of the occult.”

“And to do this, you have no problem with killing living human beings and leaving other human beings to possibly die in the future?”

“So what if I am?”

“*Then you are one of the criminals that I detest.*”

I received no reply.

The connection suddenly cut off. I tried to dial a few emergency numbers, but I could no longer connect. My number must have been removed from the communications restriction system.

“Get away from the window. It will probably be difficult to leave this hotel.” I simply gave my conclusions to the others in the room.

“This hotel is probably surrounded by riot police. Not only is there some incident related to dangerous Youkai being carried out here, but some others have come here to use it to their advantage.”

Part 23 (Jinnai Shinobu)

I rode the elevator to the 3rd floor. As the door opened, the satellite phone received a call.

It was from a different number than I had called before.

But when I answered, I heard the same girl's voice.

"…Ksshh…Is this…Hishigami Mai-san…ksshh…?"

She doesn't know who has the phone?

That must mean…

"Are you the real from Hyakki Yakou?"

"Who are you…ksshh..? No, that does not matter. If that phone has left Hishigami Mai's possession, does that mean she has lost?"

I could not deny the possibility that this was the same girl (?) from before messing with me. But I could see no reason for her to do that. She had said she knew what I was doing. I didn't see what information she would need to put on another act to get out of me.

"She gave me the phone herself. She is fighting somewhere, but I don't know the details. What was it she said she was fighting? ...Illness Magic, I think."

"That member of the top 5? That is not a good matchup. It isn't a matter of power. She is horribly incompatible with that opponent."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Nothing…ksshh. No matter who you are, I doubt you can stand up to someone she cannot. This may sound coldhearted, but I think I need to change my plan."

I did not like abandoning her, but it was true I couldn't exactly turn around and help that woman.

"You must have some connection with the hotel. Either a worker or a guest. Ksshh…The Package prepared by someone *claiming to be from* the Sakoku faction covers the entire hotel, so I assume you are a guest if you are still there.”

The way she referred to the enemy seemed needlessly roundabout.

Had this girl also noticed something off about them?

“I am a guest. I was lured here with a free lodging ticket.”

“Then you are one of the survivors of a Youkai incident. Someone there should have a deep connection with the Zashiki Warashi in the hotel. Please contact that person. That is the only way to bring this to an end.”

And there it was.

If this girl was the same one as before, that would have been the bluff she was most worried about. My ability to interfere with the Zashiki Warashi at the core of their plan. She probably thought the odds were exceedingly low but still impossible to ignore.

To find a way to stop it, she had to get the information out of me.

The girl from Hyakki Yakou that carried out that coup d’etat had said she knew the situation here, but she could very well want to preemptively eliminate a risk.

And…

Even if this girl was who she claimed to be, she was still a member of Hyakki Yakou.

I had no idea why she had called the satellite phone. She may have had her own objective and interests that were different from the Sakoku faction’s.

And she might need the Zashiki Warashi to do it.

Either way, I had to tread carefully from here on out. So carefully that I had to hide even the fact that I was treading carefully.

“I know Hyakki Yakou is trying to retrieve the Zashiki Warashi,” I said.

“I doubt doing so has any real merit.”

“But they were saying they would be revived if the Zashiki Warashi is brought back.”

“A household does not decline because a Zashiki Warashi left. The Zashiki Warashi leaves because the household is declining. … Ksshh… That is why you often hear that misfortune falls on a household once its Zashiki Warashi leaves, but you never hear of a Zashiki Warashi coming back. Unless the people of the household solve the underlying problem in their household, fortune will not return to them.”

“So the cause is within Hyakki Yakou?”

“That should be obvious since you have been wrapped up in our issues.”

“If you aren’t after the Zashiki Warashi, what do you want us to do?”

“The only way to bring this to an end is to search out the details of the enemy’s Package and destroy it.”

“How will that bring this to an end?” I was unsure if I was succeeding in drawing information out of her, but I continued speaking anyway. “We may be able to escape from this hotel, but won’t Hyakki Yakou keep trying to acquire the Zashiki Warashi? I have no idea where you people are. Wouldn’t we be left trembling in fear of another attack with no way to fight back?”

“Why would you?”

“What?”

“If you only just so happened to meet the Zashiki Warashi here in the hotel…ksshh…why are you so worried about her continuing to be targeted once she leaves the hotel?”

Oh, shit!!

That had not been the proper reaction for a normal guest who could just leave all this mess upon escaping the hotel. It had been the reaction of someone who would be staying with the Zashiki Warashi after escaping the hotel.

If this was the same girl as before putting on another act, then she had known who I was from the beginning.

But if this was the real girl and she was planning to use the Zashiki Warashi in some plan, it would be better if she did not know I had a connection to the Zashiki Warashi.

I needed something.

I needed anything that could explain away that reaction!!

“D-do you promise not to tell anyone?”

“Ksshh…Tell anyone what?”

“…It was love at first sight…”

“Nyah!?”

My whisper elicited a strange shout from the phone.

The girl then lowered her voice to match my whisper.

“Oh…um…Hyakki Yakou has a few records of…um…unions between humans and Youkai. Ksshh…So it is not impossible…”

Why did this have to head in that direction?

Well, whatever. I managed to fool her.

“How will getting rid of the Zashiki Warashi Package solve the fundamental problem? The person behind all this is comfortably watching everything from well out of our reach, right?”

“No,” said the girl decisively. “The environment surrounding you…ksshhh…spreads much farther than you think. Ksshh…And the same goes for the person claiming to be from the Sakoku faction who is circling above the Pacific Ocean.”

“?”

“They…ksshhh…have not realized it yet. They do not know how far it spread…ksshhh…after they pulled the trigger. Kssshhh…If they did, they would never have left *that* there with so little defense…ksshh. Ksshh…Even though it is a necessary part of the Zashiki Warashi Package, they…kkkkkksssssssssshhhhhhhhh!!”

“Hey, what’s wrong? I can’t hear you. What do you mean by ‘that’!?”

“Kssshhh!
Ksssssssssssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

The static grew so loud I had to move the satellite phone away from my ear. When I hesitantly brought it back to my ear, all I could hear was the dial tone. The screen displayed a message saying the connection had been lost.

Had the Hyakki Yakou coup d'etat group interfered?

Or had something happened to the girl directly?

"…That got me nowhere."

I had not been able to receive whatever crucial hint that girl had. Then again, I had no way of telling whether she was telling the truth or if she was putting on an act for her own ends.

At any rate, my only option was to meet up with the Zashiki Warashi.

If that indoor Youkai was a crucial part of the Package at the core of it all, meeting up with her would likely help me figure something out.

I returned to my room and knocked on the door.

For an instant, the thought of no one answering or kicking down the door and finding a bloody scene passed through my mind, but luckily, the door opened after a slight delay. The person who opened the door must have checked through the peep hole first.

My uncle was the one who opened the door.

"Shinobu, you're okay."

"I want to put an end to this. Is the Zashiki Warashi there?"

My uncle headed back into the room. I followed him in. The Zashiki Warashi…was there. She was sitting on the single bed. Madoka was sitting on the floor. A girl whose name I did not know was there was well. And curled up at the Zashiki Warashi's feet was…

What? …A dog? No, a Sunekosuri?

"Zashiki Warashi, I need to speak with you."

"If it's a confession of love, wait until Christmas Eve. I'm steadily making progress on a merciless, decisive, and hilarious plan for that."

“Damn you!! There are some things you don’t joke about!!”

She had been showing some signs of dere recently, but it looked like I needed to dig a bit deeper into that. Especially with that cold bath and nursing her back to health from before!!

“…So, Shinobu. What do you want to talk about?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but then froze in place.

The girl (?) from the Sakoku faction of Hyakki Yakou had said she “knew” what was happening here. I had no idea how she “knew”, but wouldn’t I be putting unnecessary risk on everyone in that room if I told them the core of the issue?

And the danger did not end if we escaped the hotel.

This held the danger of having that organization constantly targeting us for the rest of our lives.

I decided to tell as few people as possible.

“Let’s leave the room first.”

“?”

The Zashiki Warashi and I left the room.

Before we began speaking, the Zashiki Warashi grimaced.

“…Ow…”

“What’s wrong?”

“I have a bit of a headache.”

“Even though you’re a Youkai? I thought you couldn’t be hurt by normal methods.”

“I am not immune to things like heatstroke.”

“Come to think of it, that Yuki Onna has seemed a bit dizzy after taking a bath lately.”

“It might just be that time of the month.”

“Unfortunately, I do not think that’s it.”

"What did you want to talk about?"

"I want to ask about where you were before coming to my house."

The Zashiki Warashi leaned up against the hallway wall, pressed her index finger to her temple, and sighed.

"I get the feeling you aren't going to be satisfied if I just tell you I was protecting some other household."

"The term Hyakki Yakou has come up. Does it ring any bells?"

"Shinobu." The Zashiki Warashi quickly called my name before continuing. "In all seriousness, you might die. Even if you make use of the information I have and escape this hotel, you have no hope after that. I know staying here and not doing anything isn't an option either, but you should think long and hard about how you plan to resolve this."

"The very fact that I know the term Hyakki Yakou shows I've already gotten involved. Holding back now out of fear isn't going to get us out of this."

With that response, I showed I had resigned myself to this.

And I continued.

"So if I'm going to do this, I'm going to go all out. I will completely crush the enemy. I want to get back to my normal life after leaving this hotel, and I can't do that if I hesitate to take a running start. I will jump to the other side of the cliff. If I chicken out, I will fall. The odds of success are not good to begin with, but I need a full running start to have any chance of survival."

The Zashiki Warashi tilted her head in puzzlement.

Her long hair covered her face so I could not see it.

"Hyakki Yakou," she whispered. And then she continued. "Hyakki Yakou has been involved in all sorts of things for a long time. And it seems one of those things involved Zashiki Warashi. Since it is in my nature to wander from house to house, I had assumed I had just happened to end up with Hyakki Yakou. But it turned out I was wrong."

"…You mean they influenced what house you chose?"

"I don't know. All I know is that it was odd. I still do not know what exactly happened, what they were after, or even if they succeeded or not. That is the level Hyakki Yakou has reached. The millennium-old established theories that humans cannot kill Youkai and that humans cannot understand what Youkai are thinking do not apply to that group."

Was the true threat humans or Youkai?

Or could Hyakki Yakou even be counted as humans?

"A Zashiki Warashi moves from house to house based on the rise and fall of the households, but after I saw a portion of the things going on there, I decided to leave of my own will for the first time. …I essentially ran away, but that may show that Hyakki Yakou's methods were imperfect. Or perhaps they were already headed down the path of destruction at that point."

"Was it after that that you came to my house?"

"That was about 150 years ago. I had some difficulties because places for Youkai like me were decreasing rapidly thanks to the end of Edo period. I certainly never expected for those places to make a comeback in the name of 'Intellectual Villages'."

"And Hyakki Yakou never tried to take you back?"

"There is no point in it."

…?

She makes it sound so simple…but wait. That isn't what I heard.

"When a Zashiki Warashi like me leaves a household, it declines. At the very least, Hyakki Yakou had to have some internal trouble at the time. The stronger the household, the greater the chaos. And as I said, Hyakki Yakou was involved in many dangerous things, so there was a danger of causing a chain reaction that would destroy them utterly."

"But Hyakki Yakou didn't collapse. They still exist today."

"Since I had left by that point, I can only speculate, but they probably did some insane things to get back the power they lost. It was a twisted place to begin with, but I get the feeling they have become even more twisted now."

"What are you basing this speculation on?"

"From stories I have heard from Youkai passing by the house. Also…they are using everything they have to retrieve a Zashiki Warashi that has already left them. *Hyakki Yakou must have transformed into something else if they do not realize the reasoning behind that is flawed.*"

"…You knew what they are trying to do?"

"From the moment you uttered the term Hyakki Yakou, Shinobu."

The Zashiki Warashi let out a deep sigh.

Either her headache was getting worse or the problem we were facing had her worried.

"Shinobu, you said Hyakki Yakou is at the core of this. And if they are after me, Yukari, specifically rather than any old Zashiki Warashi, that has to be their aim. If their plan simply needed a Zashiki Warashi, they should have targeted one they had no previous connections to. It's an issue of purity. I don't know if it's due to the good fortune or if it's some spiritual thing, but Zashiki Warashi are welcomed in this day and age. And they are not exactly rare. I can see no good reason for them to specifically target me."

"It 'seems' like Hyakki Yakou has undergone a split after a coup d'etat. But it only 'seems' that way. It might not be true," I warned. "It also 'seems' this rampage is thanks to that. According to the group that 'seems' to want to bring an end to the coup d'etat, we need to figure out how this Zashiki Warashi Package works to resolve this problem. Since it 'seems' you are the one it's built around, do you have any ideas or hunches?"

"That's a lot of 'seems'."

"What do you think they could gain by lying about all that?"

"I don't know." The Zashiki Warashi seemed to be the type to not give much thought to things she did not immediately know. "Oftentimes, the Youkai a Package is built around is completely unaware of it. And in this case, Hyakki Yakou is behind it. They will have meticulously arranged the environment. It's a miracle I am even feeling this headache."

"…So it isn't going to be that easy."

“But if they have built a Package around me to create some kind of bizarre phenomenon, it would probably be related to a house or building.”

“So you’re saying the hotel itself is a part of the Package?”

“Not necessarily. Basically, they have to prepare something that perfectly corresponds to it and use that. It would be similar to magic that that uses a doll to harm a human. It could be a model of the hotel or a diagram of its layout. There should be plenty if we look. Unlike the old days, this age is quite convenient.”

…*Wait.*

Didn’t I see something like that?

That girl said something about the core of this Package being in the hotel. Not an illustration or a piece of art, but something functional and crucial to the Package. Where had I seen it?

“…I know.”

“?”

“The diagram. The diagram of the hotel on the wall behind the front desk!!”

Part 24 (Zashiki Warashi - Yukari)

The diagram of the hotel?

Hotel diagrams had to be all over the place. For example, on the inside of every room's door. If I recalled correctly, they provided escape routes for guests in the case of different disasters. They were not required by law to be posted there, but it seemed to be standard.

And other than those escape route maps, oftentimes other diagrams would be posted to show the way to the restaurant and other services.

But…

Those diagrams did not need to be perfectly accurate. For example, the escape route maps only needed to show the way to the emergency exits. It could omit portions of a long hallway and things like that. Diagrams and maps that were precisely made would probably be rare.

"The diagram at the front desk?"

"That's right. A huge diagram was hanging on the wall behind it. If something that corresponds to the hotel is being used as a part of the Package, it has to be that."

"But you have no idea how many hotel diagrams there are in the building. What about the escape route maps or guide maps? There might be a diagram in the pamphlets. What makes you so sure the diagram at the front desk is the one?"

"I think Hyakki Yakou knows a lot of things about this situation that we can't see. And it probably goes even beyond what I am imagining." Shinobu grinned as he headed for the elevator hall. "But there is one thing not even Hyakki Yakou can see. I was affected by the Zashiki Warashi Package. And that Package shows you an ominous future. *And that is why a complete amateur like me knows something Hyakki Yakou does not.*"

"You saw something in the future?"

"I noticed something that seemed odd and it might be the true crux of this issue.”

“So you’re saying anything good that happens from here on out is thanks to me.”

“I would rather bow down to Hyakki Yakou than say that.”

We rode the elevator down to the first floor. No workers were at the front desk when we arrived. And sure enough, a giant decorative diagram of the hotel’s first floor covered the wall behind it. It looked like someone had framed a wooden board covered with paper.

Oh, dear.

When I drew closer, I noticed something was splattered here and there on the diagram. I could see red dots of what looked like blood. It may have corresponded to what was happening in the hotel.

However…

It would be too naïve to think breaking that diagram would resolve the situation. That was like trying to stop a precise time bomb with a karate chop.

All the more so since this Package had been assembled by Hyakki Yakou.

“So what drew your attention to this diagram?”

“In the prediction the Package gave me, *this was not the diagram I saw,*” said Shinobu. “I didn’t take much notice of it at the time since I was finding corpse after corpse of people I knew, but I remembered it once I had calmed down and thought back on it. The diagram hanging here was not this one.”

Shinobu climbed over the front desk and headed for the back wall. He reached for the large diagram that seemed to be covering some kind of painting and removed it.

And behind it was…

“This is…”

“This is a diagram of our house,” said Shinobu.

That's right. It was a diagram of the Japanese-style thatch roof house that I currently protected.

So is this what Shinobu saw in that vision?

But it turned out that was not right either.

"This isn't what I saw either."

He then removed that diagram. And below it was a third one. This one I had a feeling Shinobu did not recognize. Most likely, none of the hotel's guests would recognize it. Of all the people here, I was probably the only one who knew what it was.

"…That's Hyakki Yakou's old headquarters."

"So it's going backwards. Zashiki Warashi, this is your history. If I removed this one, I would probably find the diagram of the house you protected before it. And when we go forward through history, the diagram on top was for this hotel. Do you see what that means?"

"They are trying to move me from your house to this hotel?"

"I have no idea if they can make you do it against your will, but given what Hyakki Yakou wants, that is likely their ultimate objective. You might be stripped from our house when you are completely drawn into the Package."

"But this…"

"So you noticed?" Shinobu spoke slowly as if rearranging the information in his head on the fly. "You are a Youkai that wanders from house to house. And you are thought to control the fortune of the house you currently reside in. *But that isn't accurate.* The house a Zashiki Warashi leaves will decline. Even after the Zashiki Warashi has abandoned a house, the Zashiki Warashi's effects remain. In other words, you are still directly having a negative effect on Hyakki Yakou. I have no idea where Hyakki Yakou's headquarters are, but if we have something that can directly interfere with you, *then we can attack Hyakki Yakou's headquarters no matter where they might be. Just like they tried to interfere by putting these red dots on the hotel diagram.*"

His reasoning may have been sound.

When based in the laws of Youkai rather than the laws of physics, his reasoning may have been sound.

But…

“That won’t work.”

“?”

“That will not work here. We do not have enough here to strike back against Hyakki Yakou.”

Yes.

I knew of a fatal weakness in Shinobu’s escape plan.

“Hyakki Yakou’s headquarters were lost long ago. It was the thanks they got for making too many enemies. They are likely using some completely other place for their headquarters now. In other words, *you will not find the heart of Hyakki Yakou by heading back into the past. Hyakki Yakou’s heart lies in the future, so it is out of our reach*. Most likely, Hyakki Yakou plans to transfer me to this hotel and then hang a diagram of their new headquarters over the hotel diagram to transfer me there!”

I did not look at Shinobu’s face when I told him that. I had a guess what his expression would be, but I did not look. After all, if that was the only hope we had and if that was the trump card Shinobu and the one who gave him the information had, then the only fate left for us was…

Vwah!?

Why is…

My consciousness began to break apart. It was coming from the right of the front desk. The hallway leading away was now wrapped in a dim darkness. The lights were still on, but it was now too dark to see far back into it and the area was wrapped in a clearly odd atmosphere. I was a Youkai so I could not be killed easily, but what I saw there made even me tremble. It felt ominous. I was fearful. I had felt this feeling before. I knew it well after the time I had spent in that place.

Hyakki Yakou.

An existence even more deviant than a simple deadly Youkai.

The woman who had stabbed a man with a fork had maintained her camouflage even after taking action. That was frightening enough, but this was on a completely different level. This was a mass of fear that gave one a new idea of what “pure” fear was.

As sweat soaked my body, I heard a simple electronic tone. It was as if someone had been waiting for that moment. It was coming from the object in Shinobu’s hand that looked like an unrefined cell phone. Shinobu must have had an idea who it was from because he looked nervous as he answered it.

I heard a young girl’s voice come from the device.

But was it really a girl speaking?

“I see you have made it to the core of this issue.”

“Thanks to you.”

“You probably have only a few minutes until the Illness Magic user reaches you. I do not care what you do until then, but you cannot reach me no matter what you do to those diagrams.”

“So I take it destroying the hotel diagram will not destroy the Package.”

“If you do that, you will only cause the hotel to come crumbling down with you inside. But the frame is sturdy and the glass is bulletproof, so destroying it would prove difficult.”

“What if I destroyed the diagram of Hyakki Yakou’s old mansion?”

“That mansion burned to the ground long ago. It is possible you might damage some unrelated building that has been built on the land since, but it will not reach me.”

That was right.

The final piece of the puzzle was not in the hotel.

Shinobu needed the diagram of Hyakki Yakou’s current headquarters. But it was not here. Once the Zashiki Warashi…that is to say, me…was fully drawn into the Package, my residence would transfer to the hotel. Then they just had to hang up the new diagram to complete their plan. And Hyakki Yakou had no reason to bring that final diagram here at this stage.

But…

“I just have one last question,” said Shinobu.

His tone of voice cut through my fear and made me frown. It did not match the situation. He seemed to have some hope left.

“In your Zashiki Warashi Package, you take the abilities of a Zashiki Warashi to keep adults from seeing her and to inform people of coming fires or other dangers to the household, and you have rebuilt them so that they will show people images of ominous predictions of death, right?”

“Yes. Due to the circumstances, we can only show them. We cannot see them as well. However, that tragedy of yours is set in stone. Whatever you saw, it had to have been an ill omen.”

“And it was. The current situation is at a high enough difficulty level that even that woman’s safety is unclear. This has been made so anyone would lose no matter what they do. So I believe what I saw in that vision. If I do not stop this, it will definitely happen. But that wasn’t my question,” said Shinobu. “Does this Package of yours only work once?”

“What?”

“The hotel diagram is only of the first floor. And I didn’t see any illusions like that after heading into the elevator. What I want to know is: will I be forced to see that prediction again and again as long as I stay on the first floor of the hotel?”

I could not figure out what Shinobu was getting at.

I could not see how seeing horrible visions over and over would help him escape this crisis.

Despite the present danger of a Hyakki Yakou member approaching, I focused on Shinobu.

“Dammit. It’s all twisted around. I can’t figure out the order of events. It's just like back then. The Zashiki Warashi prediction is coming again."

"What good does that do you?" asked the girl over the phone. "What help can you get by seeing a future that you cannot avoid? As I said, you cannot stop us with just the diagrams in that hotel. You are missing one crucial piece. What do you hope to accomplish?"

"*It wasn't this one,*" cut in Shinobu.

The force behind his words did not merely bring him to the same level as this person from Hyakki Yakou. It brought control of the conversation to him.

"The diagram I saw in the vision wasn't of the hotel. *But it wasn't the diagram of Hyakki Yakou's old mansion either.*"

"What…?"

"*The diagram I saw was for a special V-shaped passenger jet called a flying wing!* After it was all over, that diagram was placed over the others! That final piece may not exist here now, but it will be there in the future. And I saw the future!!"

The pen used when checking in was sitting on the front desk.

Shinobu snatched it up and brought the tip directly to the surface of the front desk.

"I only know the broad details right now. I can't make a detailed diagram right now. But if I see that scene again, I will acquire your weakness! By drawing it on the desk, I can bring the diagram of that flying wing back to the present!!"

"!! The Illness Magic!!"

I distinctly felt something approaching through the dim darkness spreading through the hallway. But something held it back. It was being stopped by something.

Is someone standing up to that monster!?

"You said this hotel would collapse if I destroyed the hotel diagram! And you said a new building constructed on the same land might be destroyed if I destroyed the diagram of Hyakki Yakou's old mansion. So if I have the diagram for that flying wing, I can make your airplane break apart in midair!!”

The girl was shouting something, but Shinobu did not seem to be listening.

His body lurched forward.

His eyes were following something that was very clearly not there.

Part 25 (Jinnai Shinobu)

And…

I once more faced that tragedy that I had never wanted to see again.

Part 26 (Jinnai Shinobu)

I had returned. I had returned to that place. I had returned to that time. It was such a horrific scene that I could feel sweat unnaturally pouring from my body, but I did not have time to care. I gripped the pen and faced the front desk.

I had to finish before this fresh fear left me.

I had to drag that flying wing diagram from the future and into the present!!

“That is impossible…” I could hear the girl’s voice coming from the satellite phone. “Even if you have the information from the diagram, an amateur cannot draw it well enough free-hand! You do not have the time needed for that!! One of our top 5, the Illness Magic user, will reach you soon. You will be eaten into and destroyed before you can finish!!”

“Hey, just to be sure: you drove the proper owners of that thing out and no one but the Sakoku faction of Hyakki Yakou is onboard, right? The real girl ran away somewhere, right?”

“What are you-…?”

“Also, I hope you’re flying over the ocean right now. I would really like to end this without getting any innocent people involved. *I heard you were circling around above the Pacific Ocean,* so hopefully that was accurate.”

“Illness Magic, the contents of the prediction do not matter. Eliminate the uncertain factor right now!!”

“Will that tragic future finally arrive or will I put a stop to everything here? Let’s see who is faster, young lady.”

The tip of the pen raced across the desk.

At the same time, I noticed a strange black spot appear on the end of one of the fingers on my right hand. It spread in no time at all. This was the Illness Magic. This was what managed to defeat that monstrous woman. At first, I felt no pain, but I then felt something rising up from the depths of my stomach. I was unable to keep it down and it spewed out all at once.

“Cough cough!! Cough cough!!”

It was not vomit.

I had never eaten anything that red!

The Zashiki Warashi shouted something, but I could not make out her words over a tremendous ringing in my ears. My sense of balance ceased to function properly. But it did not matter. It did not matter what happened. All that mattered was that I had to force that weakness to appear in the present!

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

“Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

As silent changes assaulted my body, I focused everything I had on my right hand. I moved it quickly but accurately. To draw that answer that existed only in my memories into the real world, I had to keep my unnatural headache and feeling of intoxication from wiping it from my memory. I had to get as close as possible to the full picture of that flying wing!!

I could feel a straining noise. I couldn’t tell if it was coming from my bones, my muscles, or my internal organs. An unpleasant sweat flowed from my entire body and I felt such a chill that I lost all sense of temperature. My legs grew unsteady beneath me and I felt like I was standing on the deck of a rocking boat. I could not stop the blood from coming out of my mouth. It was coming out so quickly I thought an entire organ was going to come up with it. My right hand shook. My strength on the pen faded. The pen fell from my hand. My final weapon slipped from my grasp.

“It is over,” said whoever it was that used that girl’s voice. “You had a chance, but you simply do not have the skill. Hyakki Yakou’s Illness Magic user is reliable. He is so reliable that counting on his success is not a gamble. That is the difference between a pro and an amateur. Your trump card is not enough to overcome his reliability. No matter what.”

“…Not…necessarily…” I forced out the words while primarily focused on catching gasps of air through all the blood. “*I do not need the pen.*”

“…?”

“Did you really think I could draw an accurate enough diagram by free-hand? Keep in mind, I’m just a high school student. I’m not an Itako and I cannot use automatic writing. *There’s no way I could actually pull that off.* And…”

As I spoke, I pulled out my true final weapon from where it was tucked into the Zashiki Warashi’s obi.

It technically belonged to me, but the Zashiki Warashi always used it as a music player.

“The 21st century is quite convenient. You can acquire an accurate diagram without drawing it out free-hand.”

“You don’t mean… A smartphone…no, the digital camera!!”

“I saw an accurate diagram of the flying wing hanging here in that tragic future. So naturally you must have a copy prepared somewhere in the hotel, right?”

“Illness Magic… Fall back, Illness Magic!!”

“That’s right. The Illness Magic. That diagram is the cornerstone of your plan. You cannot allow it to be altered or damaged in the slightest, so you would leave it with the strongest person you had. You didn’t want it getting destroyed before the plan was complete! That made things simple for me. I had to make the Illness Magic user rush things so the boss character carrying the flying wing’s diagram would let his guard down! I had to get him to come forward and step into the danger zone!!”

Of course, I was just a high school student.

No matter how much I made him rush things, I could never hope to win against someone who sounded like they belonged in an RPG like this Illness Magic user. I would likely be unable to make him falter for even an instant. I would only end up transformed into some gruesome corpse.

But…

Someone else was there.

When I had started to draw the decoy diagram, the Illness Magic user had oddly stopped moving when he started to come to stop me. It had been as if something was preventing him from approaching. There was definitely something there. It was that monstrous woman who seemed more suited to appearing in an RPG than your average Youkai. She was the only one who could stand up to that Illness Magic user.

And so I just had to shout.

“You don’t have to defeat him… Just snatch it away from hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiimmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm!!”

I heard an odd rumble in response.

The dim darkness filling the hallway wavered unnaturally and I glimpsed something white.

It was a large sheet of paper that had likely been rolled up.

It was a diagram.

A diagram of a flying wing.

A diagram of Hyakki Yakou’s headquarters.

It quickly disappeared into the dim darkness like it was a ship sinking into the ocean at night. But before it did, I had held out the lens of my smartphone and the phone sent out several quick flashes of light. I took an accurate photograph of the diagram.

I lightly tossed the smartphone toward the wall behind the front desk and the long headphone cords wrapped around the fixture meant to hang the frame from.

“All I need is an accurate diagram hanging against this wall. It doesn’t have to be the copy the Illness Magic user has, right?”

“Wh-wha-…?”

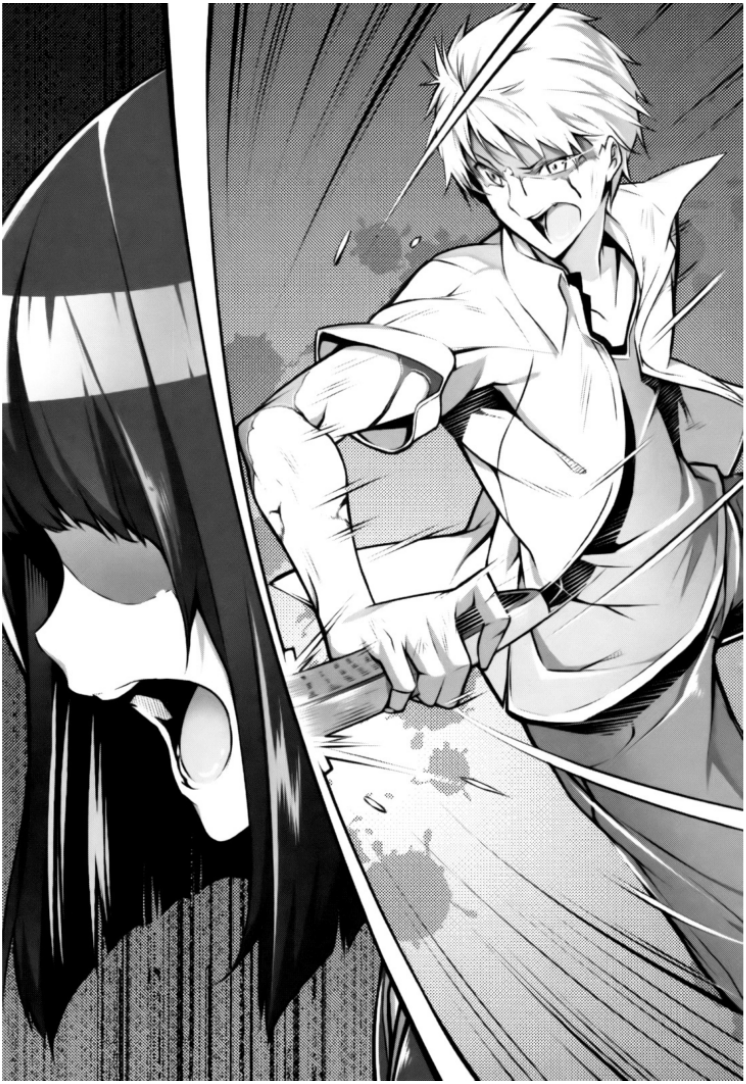
“*I’ve created your weakness,*” I said slowly to make sure.

That smartphone had been expensive and I was unsure how much longer my backup phone would last, but it had to be done.

Meanwhile…

The girl was at a loss for words. A complete loss for words. She had constantly had control of the situation as the leader of a group that neither human nor Youkai could hope to oppose, and yet she was at a loss for words.

That told me all I needed to know.



The enemy’s reaction when seeing my actions told me more than my own actions had.

Now…

It was time for me to finish things.

“Fall down to the depths of the earth, Hyakki Yakou!!”

I swung the heavy satellite phone as hard as I could and slammed the bottom of the device into my own smartphone. The second device was completely smashed. Or more accurately, the flying wing diagram displayed on the screen was completely smashed.

I heard violent static come from the satellite phone.

And I doubted it was simply due to the impact breaking the phone.

Part 27 (Hishigami Mai)

“Cough!? Cough cough cough!! Cough cough cough cough cough cough cough cough cough cough cough!?”

Ugh, I thought I was going to die.

But something must have happened since the “invasion” had ended before the Illness Magic could destroy me from the inside out. I placed my hands on the floor and coughed up a pool of blood, but that was all. That was the end of it. It looked like the Illness Magic had left my body.

In the very end, that kid had made things easier for himself. I had just meant for him to do his best free-hand to draw the flying wing diagram out of his vision of the future. But thanks to him, I had been forced to directly steal the diagram from that monster.

The dim darkness faded away slightly.

I forced open the one eye that I could not see out of thanks to the blood flowing over it, and called out into the remaining dim darkness.

“You aren’t going to continue this?”

“I see no reason to.”

“You could kill me to take revenge.”

“I act based on reason, not emotion.”

“I have to ask. What caused you all to so hurriedly throw together this coup d’etat?”

“MI6, the CIA, and the European Security Force.”

…Dammit. So that’s it.

I had forgotten about that.

“So the people putting together a system to use Succubi in Europe had you that scared? I looked into it, but it was a failure. I believe I even sent in a report.”

"The system itself may have failed, but the network built up around that failure still created a community built around the Succubus. The officials in control of the plan were completely charmed by her. Depending on how you look at it, this is an even greater threat. A demon has built this up using the power of a human organization."

I see. That is very true.

"But in that case…" I said.

"What?"

"Couldn't you interpret this infighting within Hyakki Yakou as having been caused by that Succubus? Just like our movements were controlled with those hotel lodging tickets. …And it must have been done cleverly enough to keep any of you from catching on."

"…"

"This new community would have a plethora of reasons to want the old Hyakki Yakou to be crushed."

"I suppose you could see it that way."

"Where are you going?"

"My priorities have changed. It seems there is someone else I must defeat."

And that was it.

The dim darkness completely disappeared now. The hallway was now illuminated like a normal hotel hallway. I could see clearly all the way to the wall at the end of the hallway. It looked like the Illness Magic user had truly left.

Not that he would be able to simply leave with no trouble.

He surely understood that and that may have been why he decided to leave me be and find an escape route as quickly as possible. Or perhaps he was looking for something of enough value to get Hyakki Yakou to forgive him.

"Are you okay!?"

Jinnai Shinobu came running over with the Zashiki Warashi with him. He must have received a bit of the effects of that Illness Magic.

For someone with no defenses, he had done well to withstand its effects mentally. It was possible he had what it would take to thoroughly remodel his body like mine.

“…N-not so much. If this incident continues any longer, I might seriously be in trouble.”

“I settled things with Hyakki Yakou. Their coup d’etat is over. The real girl will probably deal with the rest.”

“That isn’t the end of it.”

Dammit.

I had a feeling it would come to this. Don’t claim it’s over when you haven’t done anything to deal with that!!

“Hey, Jinnai Shinobu-kun. What did you see in your vision of the future? Were you spewing blood everywhere and dying after being attacked by some strange form of the occult?”

“Eh? Well…”

“You weren’t, were you? If you had, you would have been more cautious about dealing with the Illness Magic user. I don’t know what you saw, but it was more of a collection of different deaths, wasn’t it?”

“But I avoided that future, so the present will be different, right? …Right? Are you saying that future is still going to happen!?”

“The riot police…” muttered the Zashiki Warashi. “Uchimaku Hayabusa mentioned it. A portion of the riot police are surrounding this hotel and cutting off all communications in order to assassinate the Hishigami sisters who keep butting into the police’s turf. They are waiting for an opportunity to interfere and eliminate those sisters that they cannot normally handle.”

“Tch. Jinnai Shinobu-kun, does that match what you saw?”

“Not really… What I saw didn’t seem at all related to Youkai either though. It was more like…something from a splatter film. It didn’t look like something carried out by an expert marksman, that’s for sure.”

“The riot police can get away with it more easily by making it look that way. They probably secretly secured a serial killer to take the fall for it. …It's possible the deaths in the prediction were actually caused by the Illness Magic user, but the corpses were later altered to look more gruesome. That would be why you saw it as something caused by a serial killer."

Either way, this was bad.

Thanks to the Illness Magic user, Jinnai Shinobu and I could not move. The detective…well, he could not handle this on his own. He would be overwhelmed by a group like the riot police. My little sister was the intellectual type, so it was out of the question to ask her to fight. Kotemitsu Madoka was an unknown factor, but she probably would have played a bigger role during the issue with Hyakki Yakou if she was at all useful.

That left the Zashiki Warashi and Sunekosuri as our biggest hopes since they could not be killed easily.

But…

"Zashiki Warashi, do you think you can handle this?"

"Do not expect any kind of battling or action from me. And I refuse to act as a shield either."

"That's what I expected. And I really doubt I can expect anything out of the Sunekosuri."

A Youkai's testimony could not be used in court, so even if the riot police found they could not kill the Zashiki Warashi and the Sunekosuri, they would just ignore them and head into the hotel to slaughter the rest of us. That meant our situation could be summed up with the word "bad". I did not want to die yet and I did not want to get my little sister involved in all this.

Which meant…

"Jinnai Shinobu-kun. Where is the satellite phone I lent you?"

"It's mostly broken."

From the look of the phone he handed me, he had certainly not treated it as one should treat a borrowed item. If we survived this, I decided I would send him a bill.

I checked over it and discovered it could still make calls.

That was fortunate.

It was finally time for the final character to redeem herself.

“Young lady,” I said into the phone.

“What is it?”

“I assume you have noticed that the situation has been resolved. While I would rather not have you steal Jinnai Shinobu-kun’s victory, I have a request for you if you have retrieved command of Hyakki Yakou.”

“Tell me what you need.”

“Take care of the riot police outside.”

Those magic words showed their effects quite quickly.

Part 28 (Jinnai Shinobu)

That had been a terrible trip.

I hadn’t had time to try to get it on with Madoka, the Zashiki Warashi seemed to be planning some kind of unpleasant surprise for Christmas Eve (I had a feeling she was going to make some announcement I would be unable to refuse despite knowing it was a trap), I had never gotten a chance to approach that mystery freak girl, and her older sister had been too frightening to approach!!

And yet with Hyakki Yakou and that Illness Magic user, I had way too many opportunities to come into contact with things I did not want to!! And even now that I had returned to my thatch roof house, I did not feel comfortable at all!! I had no idea when that kind of threat was going to appear again!!

So much bad had happened and yet no good had happened whatsoever.

The moment the Zashiki Warashi returned to her own territory, she folded one of the living room cushions in half and used it as a pillow.

“It’s only when I get back that I remember how boring it is here,” she said.

“Don’t just lie around. Help me carry in this luggage.”

“I doubt it would help with this boredom, so I’ll pass.”

In the end, I was forced to carry in her luggage as well as my own. While I did so, the flat-chested Yuki Onna and the Nekomata ran out from farther in the house.

I was right. That Nekomata won over my granny so she can stay here.

“…Do you have a souvenir for me? …If not, let’s get married…”

“I heard they have a local melon-flavored pet food there.”

Eh? How can they possibly expect a souvenir?

Those two may not have known, but it was a miracle I was even alive.

In fact…

Maybe that whole incident would have been easier if I had brought along those legitimately deadly Youkai…

But the group in Hyakki Yakou that carried out the coup d'etat had probably guided us such that it didn't turn out that way.

"Shinobu," said the Zashiki Warashi as she pressed a massager belonging to my mother against her calf. (By the way, god, does it mean I have a dirty mind if the sight of a girl holding an electric massager gets my heart racing?) "Do not try to use Youkai to solve all of your problems. That would set you on the path to becoming like the people you saw."

She may have been right.

That woman, Hyakki Yakou, and the Illness Magic user.

All of them probably began with nothing more than a thought similar to mine. In most old stories, fortune given by some strange person or creature only gave you happiness if you were unaware of it.

Shita-Kiri Suzume, Hanasaka Jii-san, Tsuru no Ongaeshi, and Kobutori Jii-san.

You could benefit from those things, but it would turn to tragedy if you got greedy.

"Happiness comes to the honest" was not just a nice saying.

It was a coldhearted sign telling you those that did not know right from wrong would get their comeuppance. The people I had met may not have received any kind of obvious punishment, but that just showed how far from the normal path they had strayed.

I did not want to become like them.

It did not matter if doing so would give me the power to stand at the center of the issue.

I would rather stay on the outskirts of the issue to the very end.

"Then again, Shinobu, all that would happen if you were honest is I could have more fun teasing you. …But you aren't bad when you are like that. How about you go back to being a baby, Shinobu?"

That figured.

I was not dealing with a Buddha like in the story of the Kasajizou. I was dealing with Youkai. If you were hoping for any kind of favor, you would only receive harsh retaliation. If you were trying to subjugate them, they would provide an overwhelming counterattack. If you tried to act indifferent, they would come to you. If you tried to accept them naturally, they would have no qualms about tricking you.

I could not use them.

If I forgot to show them the proper respect, they would snap at me.

And yet when they occasionally decided to help someone on a whim, they could save someone who had only run across them by chance.

"…I wonder if there is any way to just get along with Youkai."

"That would certainly make this easier."

Suddenly, my overall small granny walked in.

"Shinobu, Shinobu."

"What is it, granny?"

"A package arrived for you. It is too heavy for me to carry in."

"??? Zashiki Warashi, did you order something on the internet again?"

"I bought a folding bicycle on your account."

"Why were you using my computer for that!? O-oh, no! My credit is going to plummet!!"

"But I would think a folding bicycle would be fairly light. It shouldn't be too heavy to carry."

I headed for the front door and found a giant cardboard box. The Zashiki Warashi was right about one thing: it didn't look like it was a folding bicycle. It was much too big for that. The box was large enough for a fair-sized washing machine.

And it was not a box from an online shopping site.

“Did my uncle send me something? Does it have a label anywhere?”

I looked closely at the top of the box.

And then…

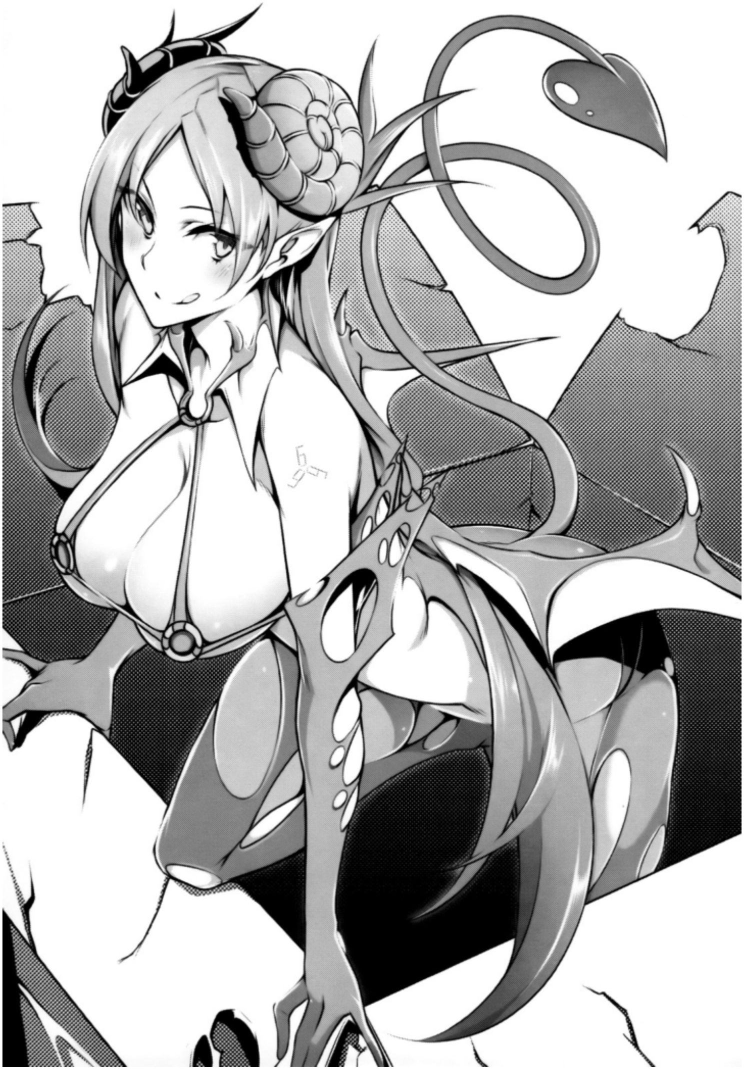
With a loud ripping noise, the top of the cardboard box tore open from the inside. Something shot out of the box and struck me on the chin.

The world spun and my sense of balance was thrown out of order. I thought it was some kind of overly enthusiastic jack-in-the-box, but it was not. When I took a step back while holding my chin with one hand, I could see what had struck me.

It was a head.

It seemed a woman had been hiding in the cardboard box and her upper body had shot up out of the box.

But…



“Ahh, I’m exhausted. Hm? Huh? I can’t get out… Well, I don’t need the box anymore. I’ll just rip it apart.”

“Wait. Wait, wait, wait, wait!!”

“You look like you’re wondering why something shaped like a human was packed into this box.”

“That’s not the main issue here!”

“But there are some things in this world that look like humans but are not humans.”

“That isn’t it either!! In fact, I know that all too well since I already have 3 Youkai living here!!"

"…Then why do you look so confused?"

The "thing" tilted her head in puzzlement and I pointed at that glamorous beauty.

"You have spiraling goat horns on your head, bat wings on your back, and a pointed tail!!"

"I don't think I could be any more stereotypical of a demon."

"We already had our hands full with Japanese monsters!! We don't need you suddenly expanding the setting with a Western one right at the end!!"

Also, I was shocked to see my granny was only grinning in amusement at this Succubus's arrival!!

"My specific race is Succubus. I make sure to evolve daily to match the needs of the current age. As proof, I am wearing the classic of the sexy swimsuits, the micro bikini. But I can switch over to a PE outfit or a maid uniform depending on your personal tastes. Your options are endless!!"

"Nnhh!!"

As my veins protruded on my temple, the Zashiki Warashi whispered to me.

"Shinobu, if you just accept this and everything it implies, you will probably die."

"Yes, it would be too much to manage… But I suppose it was too convenient for only the Japanese islands to be full of these strange exceptions. It does make sense…but isn't this the kind of thing Hyakki Yakou is supposed to deal with!?"

"I'm actually on the run from Hyakki Yakou. Using the desires of some officials in Europe, I was about to take control of an international agency in the EU when I was defeated. They were really playing dirty. They sent Illness Magic in to take advantage of a weakness to the historic bubonic plague."

"Stop, stop!! Not only is that probably full of information that will put my life at risk to hear, but I can't possibly comprehend it all at once like that!! It's all too sudden!!"

"Not necessarily."

"What?"

"Have you heard of an organization called Saishi Kajin?"

"I think they came up in the issue related to Hyakki Yakou. Weren't they absorbed by Hyakki Yakou?"

"It was an art research group made up of strange people who were working to create the ultimate beauty. The ultimate beauty they wanted to create would surpass the barriers of time period and cultural region. They intended to have this beauty sit on a throne as an empress while they devoted themselves to her."

"…Wait…"

"Oh, you're a quick one! I think I can expect great things from you, master!! Just between you and me, that sounds a lot like the community based around desire that sprang up around a Succubus in Europe!!"

"That was your organization!? Also, don't call me master! It affects me more than I'd like to admit! So you had your organization be enemies of Hyakki Yakou and then be absorbed by them to affect their balance of power? So the one behind that coup d'etat was…!?"

"I come from Western European culture, so I of course had nothing to do with the creation of that purely Japanese organization. But Saishi Kajin failed to create the beauty they wanted. I will admit to showing them a bit of a dream while they were so disheartened, though."

So you took over that empty shell of an organization!?

If that European community, or whatever it was, had also been quietly causing trouble for Hyakki Yakou, then she had put pressure on them from both within the country and without!

She had slipped through the darkness and gaps in large but not overly powerful organizations to freely draw out the power they had. I was not accustomed to Western monsters, but that way of thinking may have made her a lot more dangerous than the straightforward methods of Hyakki Yakou.

"…Wait? Th-then was the person claiming to control the Sakoku faction of Hyakki Yakou…"

She had been in the form of a girl.

She had acted on the desire for political power.

She had robbed a large organization of its calm and then taken control.

And I had sensed something off about the girl (?) claiming to be from the Sakoku faction while I had spoken to over the satellite phone.

She had spoken in general terms as if she did not understand the details of Hyakki Yakou.

Yes.

It was as if someone from outside of Japan had been speaking of things within Japan based on secondhand knowledge.

Could it be?

"W-wait a second!! So was that leader of the Sakoku faction you too!?"

"No, no. That's reading too much into it. I can't split into two like a planarian. If I could do that, I wouldn't have to run away like this. In Europe, I created a community based around desire, the European Security Force, and went around winning over high officials from allied nations. That was one of those officials."

"You're still the one behind it!!"

"Yeah, but Hyakki Yakou was the one that interfered first. One of them came to see what I was doing, so I decided to check them out. They looked weak enough, so I gave the order to work our way in deeper. I pulled out too late and ended up being utterly defeated, though. It really is a bad idea to underestimate your enemy."

Despite having caused such mayhem, the Succubus spoke about it like it was nothing. It made my skin crawl.

She controlled pure desire.

She took the complex human psyche and took control of the very base.

For that reason, she had the ability to swallow up the various systems made by man, whether they were an individual’s personality or the very institution of society.

When I thought about that, it sent a chill down my spine.

I was feeling a danger signal that my instincts would not let me ignore.

“Anyway, I was a character involved in all of this, so how about you reach out a loving hand to help me. More specifically, Hyakki Yakou proved more of a threat than I thought and I can’t seem to escape them, so shelter me here☆”

“No! Don’t say that like it’s nothing! If they find out you’ve come here, I’ll be in danger too!! And why did you choose my house!?”

“Well, my network in Europe, the European Security Force, was attacked and destroyed by Hyakki Yakou.”

“Okay.”

“That left only my connections in Japan, but I lost control of Saishi Kajin when they were absorbed by Hyakki Yakou. They were only meant as a disposable organization anyway.”

“And!?”

“So the only connections left to me were the people involved in that incident.”

“So!?”

“And of those people, you seemed to have the weakest defenses.”

“That’s alllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllll!?”

She has no real plan! She has no guarantee of having escaped!! And if Hyakki Yakou attacks here, we’ll be wiped out too!

I did have two deadly Youkai and a Zashiki Warashi, but that group seemed like they could lightly toss aside all standard knowledge about Youkai, not to mention humans. To be blunt, I saw no way we could win!!

I started imagining I could hear sounds like scraping claws coming from all the shadows in the gaps between the walls and furniture, behind pillars, and in the hole for smoke to escape from the Japanese fireplace. Meanwhile, the cause of my fears, the Succubus, was doing nothing but smiling.

“And so I’ll be moving in☆”

Whether you wanted it or not, “they” would come.

And they brought either fortune or disaster with them.

It was looking like things were going to be very bad indeed if I did not quickly find a way to get along with them.

Notes

1. ↑ Kaikoku means “open country” and Sakoku means “locked country”. Sakoku primarily refers to the extreme isolationist policies of Japan during the Tokugawa shogunate with Kaikoku being the opposite.

Afterword

It's a brand new novel!! This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This was created by expanding on the setting I had created for Dengeki Bunko Magazine.

The Intellectual Villages that make the setting here were created using the exact opposite process of Academy City from Index. This is in a world where wholesomeness and nature create the ultimate luxury brand and rural land prices have skyrocketed. This may just look like I took a rural setting and gave it an SF twist, but even the real primary sector is developing all sorts of robots to do things like climb trees and prune the branches. They are very closely related to "smart" devices and technology. I thought that contrast was interesting, so I created this setting as an escalated version of it.

This was also a Youkai story. As they have no sense of a lifespan (or rather, as you can see from Tsukumogami or animal-based Youkai like the Bakeneko, they only grow more powerful as time goes on and therefore have nothing to lose and do not feel the need to rush anything), the Youkai actually are very relaxed about the passage of time despite all the humans sneaking around making Packages and forming different kinds of groups. The monster that showed up at the very end is the only one to whom those Youkai rules do not apply, so she came up with a very human-like plan. Hopefully, you can just think of that as spreading the setting into areas this story did not touch on.

The stronger the character, the more I omitted scenes of them directly fighting. That way, I could leave it to the reader's imagination. I also expanded the scope of the story with each chapter to give the story a sense of speeding up uncontrollably like a stone rolling down a hill. I tried a lot of different experiments in this novel. You be the judge whether I was successful or not. Just as no one enjoys a test of courage or haunted house by running through it, my focus on speeding things up means it is hard to call this a horror novel despite the inclusion of Youkai. Even so, if you at least felt this was of a different genre from my previous stories, my experiment will have mostly succeeded.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editor Miki-san. I think it is thanks to the power of the illustration from when this was just a magazine project that allowed it to become a novel sitting on store shelves. And it is also thanks to the flexible plan I was given that I was able to bring in the entire manuscript without even sending in a plot summary while still keeping my yearly schedule. (In other words, I used the ninja technique of “Publication Schedule Rearrangement”.) I am truly thankful to both of them.

And I give my thanks to the readers. I attempted quite a few experiments for a single novel, so I thank you for sticking with me for this.

And I will end this here.

I will just pray that I get the chance to write a second volume.

This was a fairly experimental novel from the point that it had a large-breasted Zashiki Warashi.

-Kamachi Kazuma

Forward to Volume 2